

The political economy of Papua New Guinea's electoral quality
(why are PNG's elections bad, why aren't they worse, and how can
they be better?)

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Thank you.

The official title of my talk is the political economy of Papua New Guinea's electoral quality. But, in light of the past few weeks I thought a better title might be: why are PNG's elections bad, why aren't they worse, and how can they be better?

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to all the people who've shared their thoughts

This is a theoretical talk (sorry)

It is a work in progress (I'm keen to hear from you!)

Although I will talk about problems I acknowledge all the electoral officials who are doing their best.



Before I go any further I want to make a few pre-talk comments.

First, I want to say thank you to all the people in PNG who have shared their thoughts and insights with me. I'm very grateful for what you've taught me.

Second, I should warn you in advance: this is a theoretical talk; I am not going to talk about the details of the most recent election. There are other people who can do that better than me. Instead I'm going to give you a slightly abstract explanation of the state of elections in PNG. Sorry, this isn't as exciting as talking in depth about the 2017 elections, but I hope it will still be useful.

Third, I am still learning. I am still developing my thinking in this area. As a result I am very interested in hearing your thoughts and discussing elections with you more. Often conference presenters tell you the answers. Today I'm going to do something slightly different. I'm going to tell you what I think the answers may be. But I'm not certain. And I'm open to changing my mind based on what I learn from you.

Finally, my talk will focus a lot on electoral problems. So I want to acknowledge at the start that many electoral officials do a good job and almost everyone in PNG wants better elections. That's a positive point. And a good starting point.

Why are elections poorly run?

Many reasons but most important is because most political leaders don't care how well they are run.

Why don't they care?

Electoral quality a national issue. But most voters don't vote on national issues. They vote for localised or personalised benefits.

Means politicians don't have to worry about being punished by voters for poor quality national elections.

Instead worry about getting material benefits to supporters.
(Is why so much attention is paid to the DSIP.)

If anything politicians – as powerful people – can benefit from poorly run elections.

Without political pressure to improve: elections get worse (malign neglect).

ABC – 14 Dec 2016

Papua New Guinea's Government is trying to halve the cost of holding national elections next year and reduce the number of illegal guns in the community before polling starts.

The Government has budgeted 400 million kina (\$164 million) to run the 2017 elections, about half what the last national elections cost in 2012.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-14/png-tries-to-halve-cost-of-elections-reduce-illegal-weapons/8121404>

So, onto my first question: why are elections in PNG poorly run?

There are many reasons, of course. But the most important is that most politicians don't care how well elections are run. Some politicians care. But the majority do not. As a result they don't pressure the electoral commission to perform and, importantly, they do not provide the electoral process with the resources it needs. In the lead up to this election there was not enough funding for anything. Here you can see a news report on how the government was trying to run elections on half the usual budget. You simply cannot do that successfully.

Most politicians don't care about elections being run well, and this is a major cause of electoral problems.

The next question then is why don't politicians care? The answer is that most people in PNG choose who to vote for on the basis localised support, not national issues – and electoral quality is a national issue. I think most people in PNG want better elections, but it's not an issue that influences who they vote for. This means politicians won't be punished for poorly run elections. Indeed, if anything they can benefit from poorly run elections. The term I have for this state of affairs is 'malign neglect.'

And so, as with most aspects of governance, without political pressure and resources to improve elections, they get worse.

If most politicians don't care, why aren't elections worse?

One important reason: some election officials do their best despite difficult conditions.

Another important reason: international input.

Ongoing aid & electoral observation missions. Provides needed resources.

And some pressure to make elections better.

This helps.

But there are limits: external actors can't intervene that much. And they are blind to some issues. Their pockets aren't that deep either.



Elections could be worse still though, which means we have an interesting question: if politicians don't care how well elections are run, and if politically powerful people actually have some reason to make them run worse, why aren't elections in PNG even worse still.

One important reason why elections aren't worse still is that many electoral officials are committed to good elections, and do their best. Not all officials are, but it is worth recognising that many are. And this helps.

International assistance is also important. International observers put some pressure on governments to hold better elections. And aid money, usually from Australia here in PNG, provides much needed funding for the electoral process. International organisations and Australia also provide some technical assistance and advice which is useful.

There are limits to what the international community can do. And often international actors, as outsiders, are simply blind to problems which you really need PNG local knowledge to see. And while aid money can help there is never enough of it.

So the nature of national politics causes elections to be poor. International actors offset this a bit, but they don't offset it enough. They can't. This is why, on average, elections are poor quality in PNG.

National politics and international actors explains a lot of the state of elections. But doesn't explain variation between parts of the electoral process.

Why is counting not perfect but often better than polling, for example?

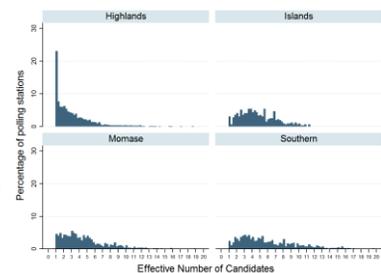
Why elections better in some parts of country than others?

Short answer: visibility and power.

When something is visible, and when all candidates' teams can see it, cheating is less likely.

When individual candidates can completely capture power in an area cheating is almost certain.

When people aren't watching, cheating happens.



The problems of national politics and the work of international organisations and donors basically explains the average quality of PNG elections.

But as an explanation it doesn't answer other important questions. Particularly it provides us with no answers for the question of why some aspects of the electoral process are better than others (why, for example, is there less cheating during counting than during polling). Nor does it answer the question of why elections are better in some parts of PNG than others.

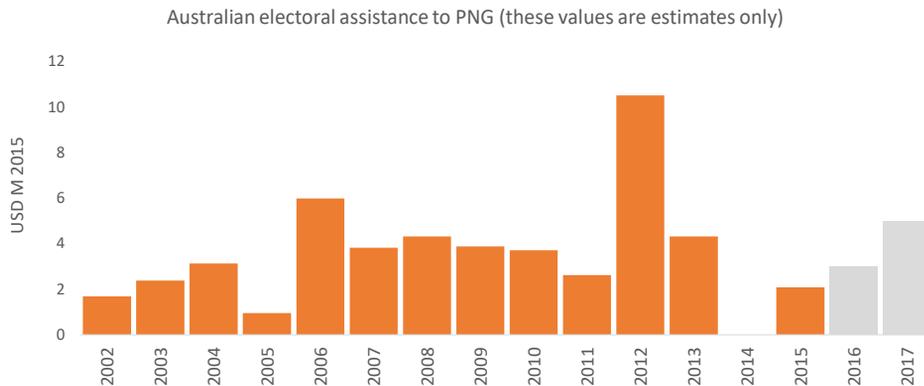
I can't go into this in too much depth now, but the answer is, very briefly, visibility and power.

When there is a balance of power which prevents any one candidate from capturing a part of the electoral process, it usually runs better.

And when matters are transparent and in the open, as is the case with counting, it is also much harder to cheat.

How does it get better? (international)

Donors need to understand: elections are crucial & their engagement needs to be ongoing.



I've covered this very quickly but that is my explanation of poor elections on average, and also why there is variation around that average.

Obviously the next question is what are the solutions?

The international community will never be a solution but it can help. The most important improvement in the way the international community acts is that it needs to understand that its engagement has to be intensive as well as ongoing. As this chart shows, after a comparatively successful election in 2012 Australian electoral assistance to PNG dropped off. This was a mistake. It needed to be continued as it was between 2007 and 2012 – that was a much better example of sustained engagement. In the absence of a committed government, ongoing work over the long term is the only way the electoral commission and electoral processes can be strengthened by outside actors. International actors need to become, and to stay, a persistent pressure for better elections.

How does it get better? (domestic)

The voter politician link won't change soon, but PNG's emerging civil society can put positive pressure on government. Has to be constructive & ongoing (lots of positive signs here; how to weave threads together?).

Push for transparency! All information in public. Push for it and use it.

Study the electoral system. Look for small changes that will balance power locally and prevent cheating.

International actors can help, but the real solutions will be domestic. The easiest solution would be if all voters started to vote on national issues, and punished governments for neglecting the electoral process as well as other national problems. This change will come to PNG, but it won't come quickly. In the meantime, the best interim solution is civil society pressuring government in a peaceful, constructive, ongoing way. Peaceful and constructive means are crucial – internationally peaceful movements for change have been much more likely to succeed than those that have not been peaceful. And ongoing pressure is also crucial. If you want the government to pay attention, elections have to be an issue that is raised continuously – every day of every year between now and the next election.

As you push for reform, one crucial area to push for is transparency – as I said, it's much harder to cheat when people are watching. So, for example, all aspects of the roll collation and ballot distribution process should be fully transparent, with roll numbers by ward and ballot distribution numbers being made fully publicly available in advance of the election. Had this been done in 2017, we would have had been forewarned of two of the major issues that really harmed this election. So push for quality and push for transparency.

And one final task that reformers should engage in is to learn the electoral system, to study its weaknesses and to look for changes that would help in many ways including finding new checks on power to prevent cheating.

Happy to answer questions + keen to talk + want to learn

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https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2667279

<http://devpolicy.org/pngelections/>



These are just suggestions. I won't pretend they are the final answer. And covered a lot in a hurry. But I'd love to talk more either in question time. Or later in the conference.

Thank you.