

Most UPNG students oppose Bougainville independence

by Anna Kapil and Stephen Howes

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Young people celebrate Bougainville Patriotism Day in Buka, 1 September 2025

Photo Credit: Facebook/AROB

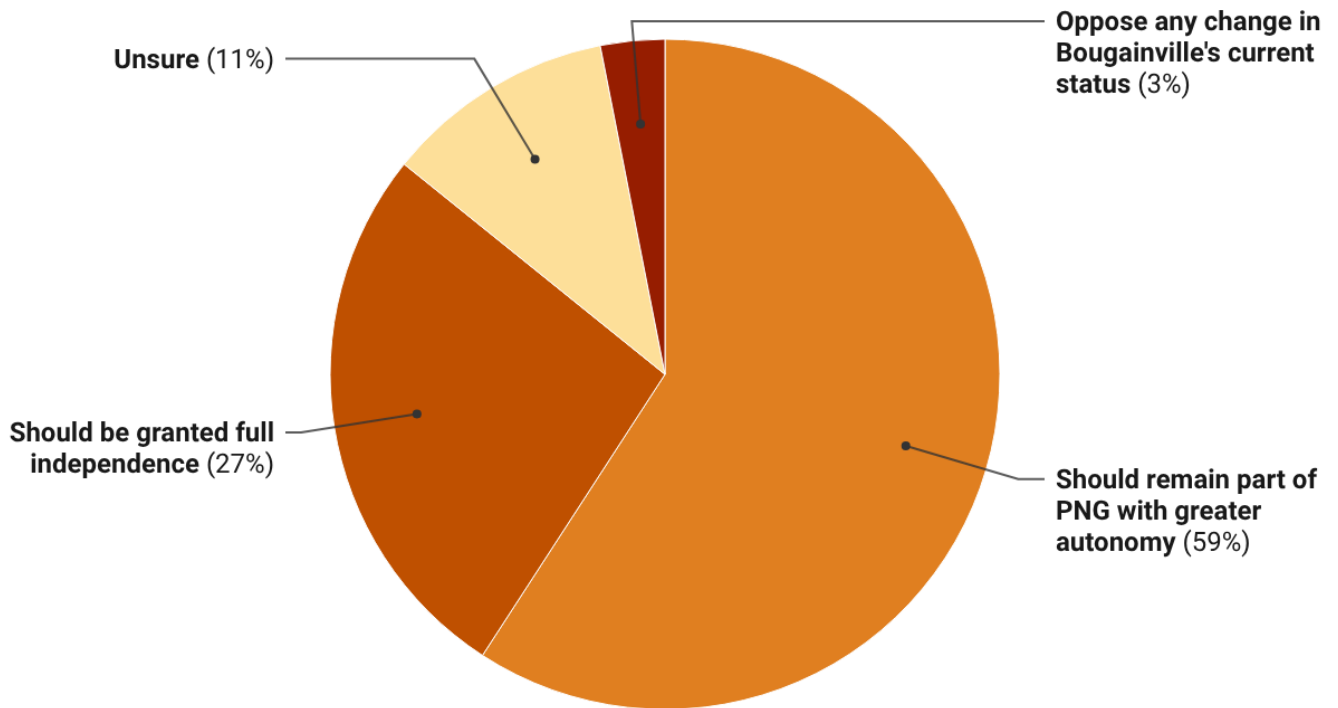
It is well known that the people of Bougainville want independence. In the 2019 referendum, 98.3% of them voted for it. And in 2025, Ishmael Toroama, a strong advocate of independence, was re-elected to the position of President of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, further confirmation of the widespread support for independence among the people of Bougainville.

But what do the people of PNG think about Bougainville independence? Much less is known about this. As a start, we included a question about Bougainville independence in the [2025 annual survey of UPNG students](#).

When asking the question, we reminded the students we surveyed of the strong support in Bougainville for independence, and told them that, as mentioned above, “in a recent referendum, an overwhelming majority (98.31%) of voters in Bougainville chose to have full independence from PNG over greater autonomy.” We then asked the students to consider this outcome when selecting from one of four options that we presented to them. They could say that Bougainville should be granted full independence, that it should remain in PNG with greater autonomy, that they oppose any changes in Bougainville’s current status, or that they were unsure.

Only 27% of the 389 School of Business and Public Policy students who took the survey supported full independence. 59% said that Bougainville should remain part of PNG but with greater autonomy. 11% said they were unsure and 3% said that they supported no change in the current status.

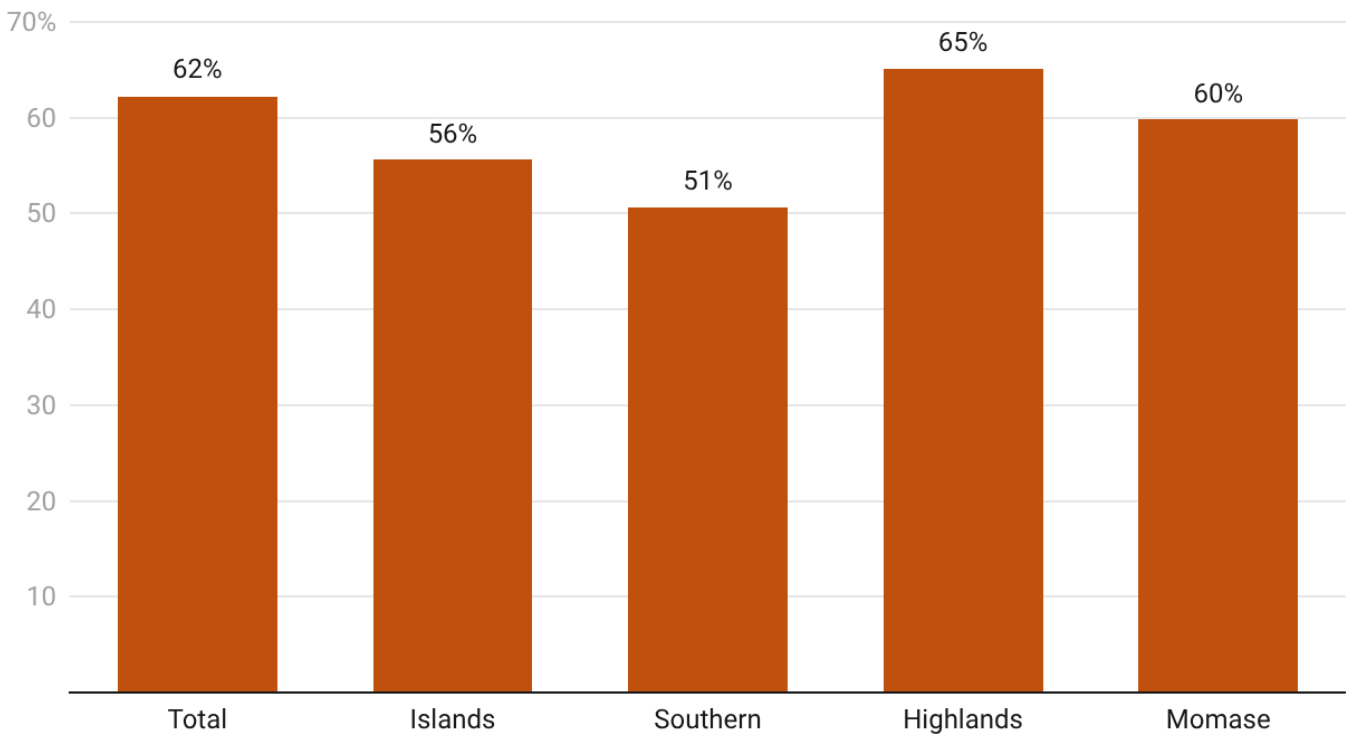
Figure 1: UPNG students' opinions about granting independence to Bougainville



Source: 2025 UPNG Student Attitudes Survey • Created with Datawrapper

Opposition to independence was widespread across all four regions of PNG, but was slightly stronger among students from the Momase and Highlands regions, and lower among students from the Islands and Southern regions. However, these differences are not statistically significant. Even in the Islands region, which might be expected to be more sympathetic to Bougainville independence, a majority of students were in fact opposed. The most supportive was the Southern region, but even there 51% of students were opposed to independence.

Figure 2: UPNG students opposed to granting independence to Bougainville



Notes: Students who said there should be no change to Bougainville’s current status or who support greater autonomy while remaining part of PNG are grouped together into the “oppose independence” category. Students were asked to nominate which province or provinces they were from and so could be assigned to more than one region.

Source: 2025 UPNG Student Attitudes Survey • Created with Datawrapper

Female students were slightly more supportive of independence (25% male vs 30% female). Male students were more likely to support greater autonomy (62% vs 52%) and women were more likely to be unsure (15% vs 9%). Again these differences were not statistically significant.

In summary, this survey of some almost 400 UPNG students found widespread opposition to Bougainville independence. We want to stress that we are not endorsing these views, nor criticising them. We are just reporting them.

The opposition we find among students is probably reflective of views more generally in PNG, at least among the elite, and might help explain why PNG’s political leaders are dragging their feet on the issue if not “**fundamentally opposed**” to independence. Few, such as the former prime minister Peter O’Neill, have come out openly to express their **opposition to independence**. But few, such as the late Morobe Premier Luther Wenge, have been **openly supportive** either.

There seems to be a general reluctance among PNG’s political leadership to respond to the 2019 referendum result, much to the frustration of Bougainville’s

political leadership. On the one hand, it seems that no-one wants a confrontation. On the other, PNG's political leadership, like UPNG's student body, doesn't seem to find the 2019 referendum result a convincing reason to support the cause of Bougainville independence.

If our survey is anything to go by, the PNG elite is willing to compromise (to allow Bougainville greater autonomy) but not to support its break away from the nation. If Bougainville wants independence, it will have to do more to win hearts and minds in the rest of PNG. Our survey shows that it is not enough to simply reiterate the overwhelming support that independence has within Bougainville. The students were explicitly reminded of this and still only one-quarter supported independence. If Bougainville is to succeed in its independence aspirations, it will need to do more to convince PNG's elite, or at least its future elite, why it should be allowed to break away.

For other findings from the 2025 survey, see [this article series](#) and the [2025 PNG Update presentation](#). The results of the first survey, conducted in 2024, are reported [here](#). Statistical significance was judged using the Chi-square test.

Disclosures:

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Author/s:

Anna Kapil

Anna Kapil is a Lecturer at the University of Papua New Guinea. She completed a Master of International and Development Economics at the Australian National University. Anna was a Greg Taylor Scholar at the Development Policy Centre.

Stephen Howes

Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre and Professor of Economics at the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/most-upng-students-oppose-bougainville-independence-20260119/>