

# Understanding popular political attitudes in Vanuatu

by Kerryn Baker, Michael Leach and Christopher Mudaliar

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Vanuatu seasonal workers living in New Zealand vote in the May 2024 referendum

*Photo Credit: Facebook/Vanuatu Electoral Office*

The *Pacific Attitudes Survey: Vanuatu* gauges the views of ordinary ni-Vanuatu across a range of themes, including how ordinary citizens engage with and trust their political institutions; their broader understandings of democracy and tradition; and attitudes to key issues like climate change and labour mobility. This is the second Pacific Attitudes Survey (PAS), following the [first survey](#) in Samoa.

The PAS was implemented nationwide in all six provinces, using face-to-face interviews with 1,330 randomly selected participants of voting age (18 years and over). Sampling reflected population proportions, like age and gender, drawn from the 2020 National Census.

The findings detail an intriguing and complex picture of political and social attitudes, with a distinctive mix of democratic and traditional values in Vanuatu's political culture. Here, we highlight six.

First, findings demonstrate that **ni-Vanuatu have a strong commitment to democracy**. The PAS found that ni-Vanuatu share a strong preference for democracy over other alternatives. Similarly, and despite recent political turbulence, 84% of ni-Vanuatu were also satisfied with "the way democracy works" in Vanuatu compared to only 15% who were not. This might be seen as noteworthy, given repeated votes of no-confidence in and around the survey period. However, while short-term political instability like that which characterised the data collection period is not unusual, the overall resilience of Vanuatu's democratic system may explain the strong commitment to and support for democracy among its citizens.

Second, **politics is generally conceptualised and practised through local and traditional, rather than national, pathways**. Ni-Vanuatu place a "great deal of trust" in church leaders (82%) first and foremost. This was followed by chiefs (79%). Respondents reported lower levels of trust in political parties (38%). While 34% of respondents reported talking to their MP at least once over the last three years, more than half of respondents (54%) reported they had "got together with others to

try resolve local problems". This reflects the notion that while formal political engagement might be relatively low (at least outside of campaign periods), informal activities at the local level attract stronger engagement. This local emphasis is valued even in national politics, with respondents noting a preference for their MP to focus on "helping with community projects", rather than promoting national development.

**Third, climate change is perceived as a lived reality and urgent issue in Vanuatu.** An overwhelming majority of ni-Vanuatu believe that climate change is an urgent problem that should be addressed (81%). From the survey results, we see strong and clear expectations that large emitters should compensate the most affected nations; that the national government should actively manage adaptation efforts; and that communities have a responsibility to accept displaced people from other areas.

**Fourth, there was widespread support for labour mobility schemes, although there are concerns about the impact on families.** A significant majority of respondents agreed that Pacific labour schemes have been both a positive for the nation (85%) and for their community (76%) overall. The biggest benefit participants noted was an "improvement to their household income" (64%) while 60% believed that "worse family relations" was the biggest negative consequence of participation in labour schemes.

**Fifth, there are noticeable inequalities in access to politics, with women far less likely to participate in both formal and traditional political spaces than men.** Men (78%) were significantly more likely to report being interested in politics than women (56%). They were also more likely to report having engaged in political activity in the past three years. Intergenerational changes were also evident, with older generations more likely to exert political influence than younger generations. While respondents demonstrated widespread support for greater women's representation in politics in principle, the survey showed that social norms of political leadership still favour men.

**Finally, both China and Australia are seen to have a lot of influence on the Pacific and Vanuatu specifically.** China was regarded as the country with the most influence in the Pacific (42%), with Australia (35%) following close behind. Both China (78%) and Australia (76%) were seen as having a "great deal of influence" on Vanuatu itself, followed by New Zealand (62%), France (55%) and the US (41%). The results of the PAS suggest ni-Vanuatu citizens have a broadly positive view of international influence, and of development assistance.

The PAS represents the first nationally representative popular political attitudes

survey conducted in Vanuatu. It provides important data on attitudes towards democracy, development, gender, climate change, labour mobility, and international relations at an important juncture in Vanuatu's history. The format of the PAS also allows for comparison — regionally through the previous PAS survey in Samoa, and internationally through the modules adapted from the *Global Barometer Survey*. The PAS Vanuatu both closes a data gap and provides a platform for further research on political attitudes and participation in Vanuatu and the broader Pacific region.

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*The full report can be downloaded at [ANU's Department of Pacific Affairs website](#).*

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## Author/s:

### **Kerryn Baker**

Kerryn Baker is a Fellow at the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University.

### **Michael Leach**

Michael Leach is a Professor in Politics and International Relations in the Department of Social Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology.

### **Christopher Mudaliar**

Christopher Mudaliar is a Research Fellow at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. His research interests include national identity construction and nation-building in the Asia-Pacific, and the politics of Fiji.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/pacific-attitudes-survey-vanuatu-20240625/>