

PNG's elections: too popular for their own good

by Maholopa Laveil

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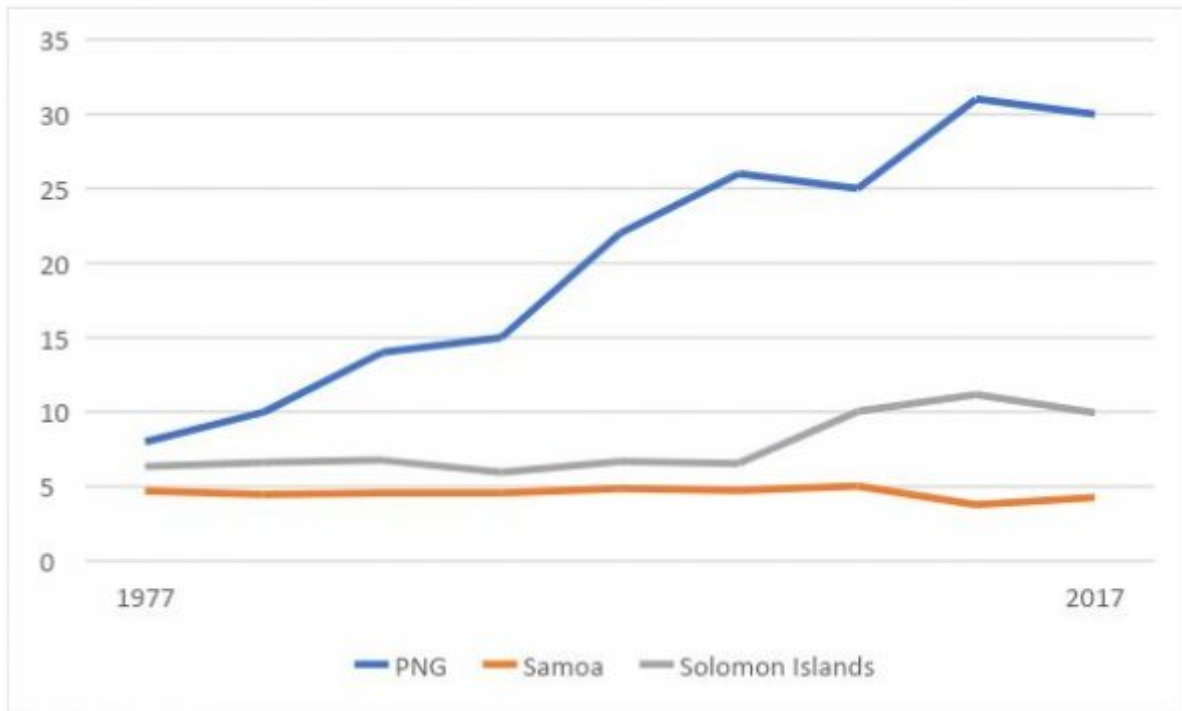


New Camp polling station in Morobe, 2017.
Photo Credit: [Commonwealth Secretariat/Flickr](#)

Growing candidate numbers in Papua New Guinea (PNG) have always intrigued me. I hail from a small island called Lou, roughly 20km southeast of the main Manus island. Manus is PNG's smallest province. In the 2017 elections, it had 31,833 registered voters, of which only 3 percent were Lou Island voters. Each Lou voter can vote for two seats, the Provincial and the Open seat, and one would imagine that Lou would field a single candidate for each seat. Strangely, this wasn't the case in 2017, when two Lou Island candidates contested the Manus Open seat, and three others contested the Provincial seat.

PNG has the highest candidate numbers per seat in the Pacific, and surely one of the highest in the world. The chart below shows average candidate numbers per electoral seat, for PNG, the Solomon Islands, and Samoa. Between 1977 and 2017, average candidate numbers increased by 275 percent in PNG, much more than the 60 percent increases in Solomon Islands, and the 0.8 percent decline in Samoa. In the same period, PNG's population increased by 153 percent, suggesting other factors are driving the growth in candidate numbers.

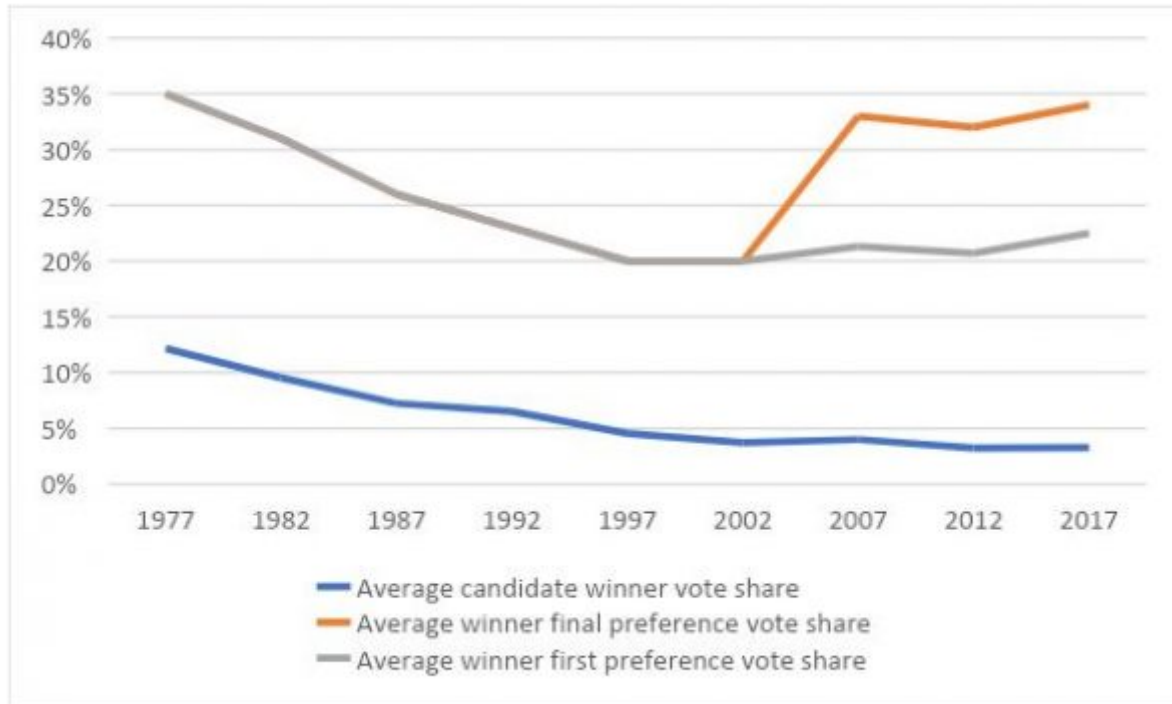
Average candidate numbers per parliament seat: 1977 -2017



Growing candidate numbers are a concern for a number of reasons. They make elections more difficult to run, for instance by making the counting process longer. Pity the voters and administrators of the average electorate in PNG who have to decide a contest between 30 candidates. Now think of those in PNG’s most popular electorate, Chimbu province, which in 2017 had 61 contenders.

As a result of average numbers rising, average competitiveness has fallen. The chart below shows the average vote share of all candidates and of the winning candidate. Winner vote shares fell from a high of 35 percent in 1977, to 20 percent in 2002, before increasing again to average 33 percent from 2007 to 2017. This jump in 2007 resulted from the change in electoral systems from the first-past-the-post (FPTP) to Limited Preferential Voting (LPV) electoral systems in 2007, which allowed voters three preferences instead of one under the FPTP electoral system. The first preference count under the LPV replicates the FPTP counting process and the average winner vote share increased slightly to 22.5 percent in 2017, from 20 percent in in 2002. In 2017, 25 percent of candidates leading the first preference count went on to lose. The average vote share for all candidates continued to fall from 12 percent in 1977, reaching only 3 percent in 2017. (The median vote share is even lower.) Contesting the elections is increasingly becoming a wasted investment.

Average candidate and winner vote share in PNG: 1977 – 2017



Within PNG, average candidate numbers vary across regions, but all have increased since 1977. Although the Highlands region had the highest average in the years after Independence, the Southern region took the lead in 1992, and continues to hold it. The Islands region has historically the lowest number of candidates contesting a seat.

The table below provides some details. Total candidate numbers have increased from 878 in 1977 to 3,335 in 2017, or a 280 percent increase in 40 years. Candidate numbers increased in all elections except the 2007 and 2017 elections, with the largest increases in the 1987 and 1997 elections.

PNG candidate and party statistics: 1977 – 2017

Year	Seat numbers	Candidate numbers	Percent increase	Share of independents to total	Political parties	Political parties with candidates in more than half the seats
1977	109	878		No data	No data	No data
1982	109	1,124	28%	No data	No data	No data
1987	109	1,515	35%	No data	No data	No data
1992	109	1,644	9%	74%	20	2
1997	109	2,373	44%	73%	23	6
2002	109	2,875	21%	43%	44	13
2007	109	2,748	-4%	No data	No data	No data
2012	111	3,443	25%	64%	43	6
2017	111	3,335	-3%	57%	43	9

One possible reason for growing candidate numbers in PNG raised in the literature is the increasing number of independents that contest every election. However, the table above shows no increase in the share of independents since 1992. Recent elections have in fact seen more candidates identify as members of a political party.

A growing number of political parties may explain some of the growth pre-2002.

However, party numbers have remained largely stagnant since 2002, whereas candidate numbers have continued to rise. Another possibility might be a rise in powerful parties – parties that have been able to endorse candidates in more than half of the country’s seats. The number of such parties did rise rapidly between 1992 and 2002 and may have contributed to candidate growth during those years. However, parties of this sort have actually fallen in number since 2002.

Growing candidate numbers may also reflect increasing fragmentation within PNG societies, or perhaps a growing alignment of PNG’s electoral system with its underlying social realities. While there is no clear explanation, perhaps it is becoming the case that any aspiring leader needs to at least be an electoral candidate. It may be the case that it is better for any individual’s leadership prospects, political or otherwise, to run and lose than not to compete at all.

Whatever the reason, high candidate numbers in 2022 will only make already problematic elections (see [here](#) and [here](#)) even more difficult to administer.

Sources: PNG’s vote, candidate, and party data can be found on the [PNG Elections Database](#); Samoa’s candidate data can be found on the [Samoa Election Results Database](#); and Solomon Island’s candidate data can be found on the [Solomon Islands Election Resources website](#). The author would like to thank Terence Wood for many great insights on PNG elections and politics.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/pngs-elections-too-popular-for-their-own-good-20201022-2/>