

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade “Inquiry into supporting democracy in our region”

Dr Terence Wood, Development Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University

Contents

1. Overview	1
2. Electoral Quality in Papua New Guinea	2
2.1 Weaknesses	2
2.2 Positives	3
3. Australian electoral assistance.....	4
4. Australia’s role in positive change	5
5. A precedent: success in Solomon Islands	6
References	7

1. Overview

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the important topic of supporting democracy in our region.

I am a political scientist. Much of my academic work is focused on electoral quality and electoral politics in the Western Pacific. This submission will focus on elections in Papua New Guinea.

Papua New Guinea has a proud history as a democracy. Unlikely many developing countries, it did not lapse into dictatorship in the wake of independence. Since becoming an independent nation it has held general elections every five years. However, the quality of elections in Papua New Guinea has now deteriorated to such an extent that electoral issues pose a real threat to its democratic future.

Papua New Guinea is Australia’s nearest neighbour. With a population of over nine million people it is by far the largest country in the Pacific. It is a former colony of Australia. It suffers ongoing low-grade tribal conflict in parts of its Highlands region. It has seen more major conflict in Bougainville. Papua New Guinea is poorer than most of its Pacific neighbours (World Bank, 2022). As measured by the World Bank, it is also the worst governed country in the region (World Bank, 2021).

While better elections will not, on their own, solve all of the governance problems that Papua New Guinea faces, reasonable elections are an integral part of being a stable democracy.

Both the 2017 and 2022 general elections in Papua New Guinea were accompanied by serious violence in parts of the country. Electoral quality was poor enough to produce outcomes that appear to have been illegitimate in parts of the country. Should future elections become worse, there is a risk that they will be a catalyst for widespread, serious violence, or a broader political breakdown.

If this occurs, it will be tragic for the people of Papua New Guinea. It will also be at odds with Australia's national interest. If Australia wishes to support democracy in the Asia Pacific region, it needs to increase and improve its efforts to promote electoral quality in Papua New Guinea.

2. Electoral Quality in Papua New Guinea

2.1 Weaknesses

Electoral quality in Papua New Guinea deteriorated throughout the 1990s, improved somewhat in 2007, but subsequently deteriorated again (Haley & Kenny, 2011; Haley & Zubrinich, 2013, 2018; May, 2008; May & Anere, 2002).

In the lead up to the 2017 general elections, the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission received insufficient funding from the government of Papua New Guinea. As a result, electoral preparation was inadequate, most notably with respect to the compilation of the electoral roll. When they were run, the 2017 elections saw major violence in parts of the Highlands, as well as less severe violence in other parts of the country (Haley & Zubrinich, 2018). There were major electoral roll inaccuracies nationwide (Laveil & Wood, 2019; Satyanand et al., 2017), there were also problems with ballot counting in parts of the country, and vote buying was widespread (Haley & Zubrinich, 2018; Transparency International PNG, 2017).

The Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission was also inadequately funded in the lead up to the 2022 general election.¹ Once again, this impeded its ability to prepare for the elections. As a result, although roll data have not been published, the electoral roll was clearly inadequate again in 2022, which led to the disenfranchisement of many voters (Waq, 2022). Polling station problems were present once again, as was electoral violence and vote buying. Concerningly, incidents of violence spread outside of the Highlands in 2022, with serious violence in Morobe and Port Moresby (Forsyth & Peake, 2022; Laveil, 2022; Wood, 2022b). Within the Highlands, violence that was either caused by the elections, or exacerbated by the elections, led to numerous deaths and caused thousands of people to flee their homes (Whiting, 2022).²

Figure 1 is based on a large international project that surveys electoral integrity globally (Garnett et al., 2022). It shows the relationship between GDP per capita and electoral quality. Each point on the chart is a country. Three countries are highlighted in red – Papua New Guinea, as well as Solomon Islands and Indonesia for comparison. The diagonal line on the chart is a line of best fit: it plots the average relationship between GDP and electoral quality.

Unsurprisingly, the chart shows a clear, positive relationship between GDP per capita and electoral quality. Wealthier countries run better elections on average. Countries below the line of best fit have worse elections than would be expected given their level of wealth.

Papua New Guinea's position on the chart is low, reflecting the fact that it has very poor elections by international standards. Papua New Guinea's elections are also worse than average for a country of its level of GDP (it is situated below the diagonal line).

¹ This is more understandable in 2022 owing to the impacts of COVID-19 on resources available to the Papua New Guinea government. However, even prior to Covid's arrival there was little evidence that the government was supporting electoral preparation.

² It is hard to know exactly how much of the problem was specifically related to the elections as some of the violence was a response to ongoing tribal conflicts that pre-dated the election; however, reporting on the violence and subsequent population displacements suggests the elections played a significant role.

The chart also shows that elections in Papua New Guinea are worse than those of Indonesia and Solomon Islands. The contrast with Papua New Guinea's Melanesian neighbour Solomon Islands is striking. I will return to this difference in the final section of this submission.

Figure 1 – electoral quality in Papua New Guinea compared with other countries

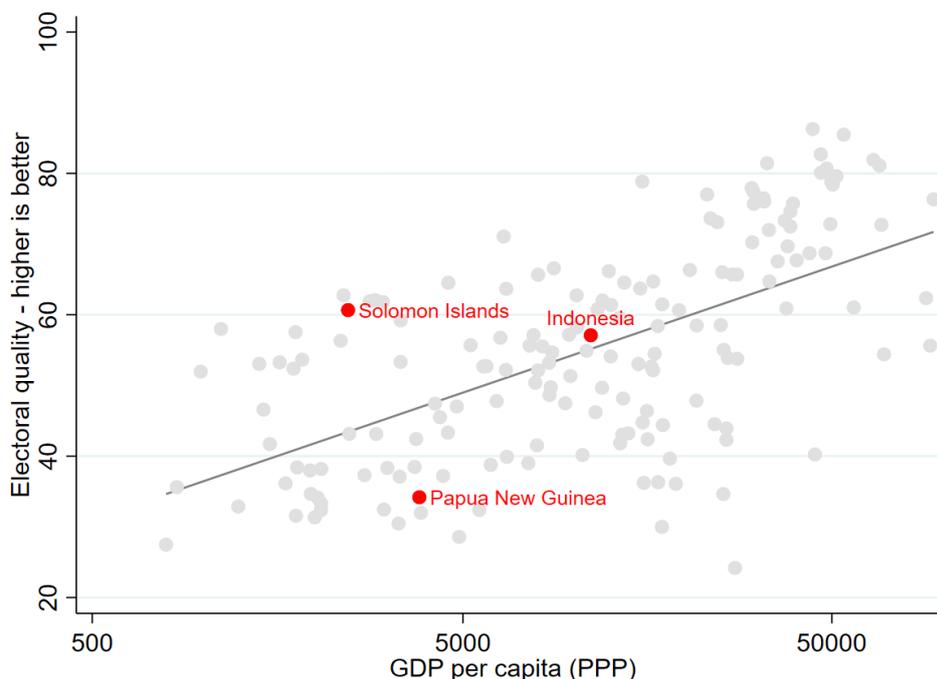


Chart notes: data come from the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Project. Each point on the chart is a country. Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Indonesia are coloured red. The diagonal line is an OLS fitted line of best fit. Each country's electoral quality score comes from its most recent election with data. In PNG's case this is 2017. Solomon Islands and Indonesia's data come from 2019.

2.2 Positives

Having noted these serious concerns, it is important to discuss “positives” – factors that make the situation in Papua New Guinea less irredeemable than it might otherwise seem.

First, although some issues, particularly the quality of the roll and also the capacity of the national electoral commission, affect the whole country, there is considerable variation in electoral quality between different parts of Papua New Guinea. In particular, the bulk of electoral violence occurs in the Highlands region (Haley & Zubrinich, 2013, 2018; Laveil, 2022; Laveil & Wood, 2019). This is not cause for complacency: the Highlands is the most populous part of Papua New Guinea; the plurality of the country's MPs come from the Highlands. Also, violence appears to be spreading. Still, for the time being, it is worth emphasising that the most serious issues tend to be limited to particular places. Hopefully, this will make future improvements in electoral quality easier.

Second, in my experience at least, most voters in Papua New Guinea want nothing more than to express their democratic right to vote. Also, in most places, the bulk of electoral officials attempt to do a reasonable job, at times under very difficult circumstances.³ There is no guarantee this will last if matters get worse, but for the time being the country as a whole has not turned its back on electoral democracy. Rather, it suffers from serious, specific electoral issues, and particularly acute problems in some places. This ought to make the task of improving future elections easier.

³ I have not, I should note, worked in the worst parts of the country, such as the Southern Highlands. But I have worked in the Eastern Highlands, and was an electoral observer in Lae in 2017.

Third, unlike in many parts of the world, electoral problems in Papua New Guinea do not stem from an autocrat having seized power and coerced the electoral commission into submission.⁴ Rather, at a national level, the country's electoral issues are a result of the strongly clientelist nature of politics in Papua New Guinea. (For detailed explanations of how this dynamic undermines governance and electoral quality in Papua New Guinea see: Wood, 2015, 2018; 2022b.) Papua New Guinea's clientelist politics mean that few MPs pay attention to national issues such as funding and supporting elections. As a result, the national electoral commission is perennially neglected and underfunded.

A fortunate consequence of the fact that Papua New Guinea's political leaders are not particularly autocratic is that international aid actors will probably find that they can push for improved elections without the concerted resistance they would face in more autocratic states.⁵

3. Australian electoral assistance

Australia is the largest aid donor to Papua New Guinea. In 2020 (the most recent year with data) it gave more than three times as much aid to Papua New Guinea as Japan, the next largest bilateral donor (Lowy Institute, 2022). Since independence, Australia has been by far the largest provider of electoral assistance to Papua New Guinea (Henderson & Boneo, 2013; Markiewicz & Wood, 2018; Notarpietro et al., 2003).

Setting aside Australian security contributions, for which no data are publicly available, Australia funded between 10 percent and 15 percent of total electoral costs incurred by the government of Papua New Guinea between 2014 and the 2017 election (Markiewicz & Wood, 2018, p. 2). The amount of money involved, about 20 million AUD, summed to roughly 1 percent of total Australian aid to Papua New Guinea over the same period (Markiewicz & Wood, 2018, p. 2).

Unfortunately, equivalent data are not available for the period leading up to the 2022 general election. However, DFAT's submission to this inquiry indicates that Australia's contribution in the lead up to the 2022 election was of a similar size (DFAT, 2022, p. 22). Because of this, it seems reasonable to assume that the relative contributions (Australian electoral assistance as a share of total cost of elections, and Australian electoral assistance as a share of total Australian aid to Papua New Guinea) will be similar.

The numbers point to several key facts:

1. Australia only funds a fairly small share of total electoral costs (10-15%). Almost all of the remaining costs are funded by the government of Papua New Guinea. Because of this, it is worth emphasising that Australia alone will never be able to determine the quality of elections in Papua New Guinea. Engagement from the government of Papua New Guinea will always be crucial.
2. However, Australia does provide a large enough share of Papua New Guinea's electoral funding that it is in a position to have a meaningful influence on electoral quality. This is all the more so because, as I have noted above, the main impediments to improved electoral

⁴ There is some evidence that senior politicians do withhold funding from the PNG Electoral Commission to make it more compliant. For this reason, increased external funding is likely an important part of the solution to electoral problems in PNG.

⁵ It should be noted that although most of PNG's political leaders are not autocrats in the conventional sense at a national level some are certainly prone to coercing voters within their electorates, even if they cannot do this on a larger scale. This will provide localised challenges.

quality in Papua New Guinea do not stem from autocratic politicians who hope to capture the national electoral process.

3. Moreover, as a share of overall Australian aid to Papua New Guinea, Australia's electoral assistance is quite small (roughly 1 percent). Australia could increase its electoral assistance considerably, and not crowd out the rest of its aid work in Papua New Guinea.

4. Australia's role in positive change

Australia, as the above numbers illustrate, is already trying to improve electoral quality in Papua New Guinea. What is more, Australia will never be the sole determinant of the country's electoral quality. The government of Papua New Guinea will always play a major role. It would be naïve to think that Australia could resolve Papua New Guinea's electoral issues easily. However, Australia can support democracy by improving electoral quality in Papua New Guinea.

In the wake of the disastrous 2002 general elections in Papua New Guinea Australia was able to work with the government of Papua New Guinea to improve electoral quality in 2007. Importantly, statements made by key Papua New Guinea politicians suggest there is political recognition of the magnitude of the problem the country currently faces and a desire to see change in the wake of the troubled 2022 elections (Radio New Zealand, 2022; Sanau, 2022; Wood, 2022a).

If Australia wants to play its role in improving electoral quality and supporting democracy in Papua New Guinea, it needs to ensure that its work in this area becomes as effective as possible. This will involve:

1. DFAT ensuring that ongoing electoral assistance to Papua New Guinea becomes a priority for its aid work in the country. In particular DFAT should increase the amount of aid it devotes to electoral assistance. This will help to provide the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission with needed resources. It will also increase Australia's voice and influence in electoral discussions.
2. DFAT proactively engaging with electoral issues throughout the five year period between now and the next election. Given the length of Papua New Guinea's electoral cycle it is easy to understand why electoral improvements become a low priority for aid agencies in the wake of elections. However, concerted work needs to start soon, particularly on areas such as the roll.
3. DFAT ensuring that it very thoroughly evaluates the electoral assistance that it gave over the period from 2017 to 2022.⁶ This ought to involve a substantive evaluation in which evaluators are given ample time to interview key actors and analyse data. Evaluators also ought to be empowered to report on negative findings (which isn't guaranteed in evaluations). Doing this will help DFAT learn as much as possible about how it can improve its existing approaches to electoral assistance.
4. DFAT carefully investigating how it works and who it works with on electoral matters in Papua New Guinea. It is my view that, at present, the capacity of DFAT's two key external partners electoral partners – the Australian Electoral Commission and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems – is quite high owing to key staff who have substantial experience in Papua New Guinea. However, it will still be worth DFAT investigating whether the institutional arrangements that it has with these partners are optimally structured. DFAT also needs to investigate whether it is sufficiently resourcing its own Papua New Guinea aid

⁶ I was involved in the 2017 evaluation of Australian electoral assistance. With the benefit of hindsight, I now believe this evaluation was too short and did not delve deep enough into underlying issues.

program staff to ensure they can devote sufficient time to electoral issues over the next five years.

5. Australia engaging at a political level with its partners in Papua New Guinea. There are senior politicians in Papua New Guinea's parliament at present who appear eager to improve electoral quality. Ongoing political dialogue will be an important aspect of improving elections and supporting democracy in Australia's nearest neighbour.

5. A precedent: success in Solomon Islands

In Figure 1 I showed that electoral quality is much higher in Solomon Islands than it is in Papua New Guinea. This is despite the fact that Solomon Islands is a poorer country. Delivering elections effectively in Solomon Islands is not as hard as it is in Papua New Guinea, but it is still difficult. Solomon Islands suffers from poor governance and has suffered serious electoral issues in the past (Wood, 2015).

Despite these facts, electoral quality has steadily improved in Solomon Islands since the RAMSI engagement of 2003. (For an excellent, detailed study of the quality of the 2019 election in Solomon Islands see: Wiltshire et al., 2019.) Moreover, improvements have continued even since RAMSI's policing presence ceased. Much of the credit for the quality of elections in Solomon Islands goes to Solomon Islanders themselves, and in particular to electoral officials. However, Australia and other international actors have played an important role in helping Solomon Islands rebuild its electoral capacity, even though, as in Papua New Guinea, domestic political actors have shown little interest in improving elections.

Successful international assistance has been a product of a well-designed program in which experienced consultants have worked alongside the electoral commission continuously over a period of years (Van de Velde, 2012; Wood, 2015, 2020). The approach used in the Solomon Islands will not be directly transferrable to Papua New Guinea. However, it provides an excellent example of Australian-led electoral assistance successfully supporting democracy in the Western Pacific.

References

- DFAT. (2022). *Submission to the parliamentary Inquiry into supporting democracy in our region*.
- Forsyth, M., & Peake, G. (2022). *Violence in the PNG elections is the result of broken systems that Australia cannot ignore*. Retrieved 15/12/22 from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/29/violence-in-the-png-elections-is-the-result-of-broken-systems-that-australia-cannot-ignore?CMP=share_btn_tw
- Garnett, H. A., James, T. S., & MacGregor, M. (2022). *Perceptions of Electoral Integrity, (PEI-8.0) Version V1* [survey data]. Harvard Dataverse. <https://doi.org/doi:10.7910/DVN/YSNYXD>
- Haley, N., & Kenny, C. (2011). Conducting and securing elections in a high risk setting: the Koroba-Lake Kapiago experience. In R. J. May, R. Anere, N. Haley, & K. Wheen (Eds.), *Election 2007: The Shift to Limited Preferential Voting in Papua New Guinea* (pp. 99-112). The National Research Institute.
- Haley, N., & Zubrinich, K. (2013). *2012 Papua New Guinea General Elections Domestic Observation Report*.
- Haley, N., & Zubrinich, K. (2018). *2017 Papua New Guinea General Elections: election observation report*.
- Henderson, S., & Boneo, H. (2013). *Australian Aid for Electoral Assistance in Papua New Guinea 2000-2012 - independent evaluation*.
- Laveil, M. (2022). *PNG's election a violent event*. Retrieved 15/12/22 from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/png-s-election-violent-event>
- Laveil, M., & Wood, T. (2019). The 2017 election in Papua New Guinea. *Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper, 83*.
- Lowy Institute. (2022). *Pacific Aid Map*. Retrieved 15/12/22 from <https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/>
- Markiewicz, A., & Wood, T. (2018). *Evaluation of Australia's Electoral Assistance to Papua New Guinea 2015-2017*.
- May, R. J. (2008). The 2007 Election in Papua New Guinea. *SSGM Briefing Note, 2008(7)*.
- May, R. J., & Anere, R. e. (2002). *Maintaining democracy: the 1997 elections in Papua New Guinea*. Australian National University.
- Notarpietro, N., Talao, F., Morgan, J., Standish, B., & Ketan, J. (2003). *Review of Australia's electoral assistance program to PNG*.
- Radio New Zealand. (2022). *PNG govt needs to act immediately to stem election violence*. Retrieved 15/12/22 from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/477038/png-govt-needs-to-act-immediately-to-stem-election-violence>
- Sanau, B. (2022). *NZ Govt to support new election committee to improve electoral process*. Retrieved 15/12/22 from https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1752146701805576&id=213810848972510&p=2
- Satyanand, A., Hartman, G., Ziru, C., Teekah, T., Whittal, J., Mohammad, N., Simon, L., Kiran, S., Dorney, S., Toa, W., Vaai, F., & Guttenbeil-Likiliki, O.-K.-L. (2017). *Papua New Guinea National Election*.
- Transparency International PNG. (2017). *TIPNG Observation Report: 10th National Parliamentary Elections*.
- Van de Velde, M. (2012). *Solomon Islands Electoral System Strengthening Program Independent Progress Report*.
- Waq, B. (2022). *Interim statement by the chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group*. Retrieved 15/12/2022 from https://production-new-commonwealth-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2022-07/PNG%20COG%202022%20-%20Preliminary%20Statement.pdf?VersionId=16_GnPY8Fhmk6rJGGXRyFRRUqWYiLqmD
- Whiting, N. (2022). *Almost 90 thousand people have been displaced by violence in Papua New Guinea's highlands*. Retrieved 15/12/22 from

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/pm/90-thousand-people-displaced-in-papua-new-guinea-s-highlands-/101475556>

- Wiltshire, C., Batley, J., Ridolfi, J., & Rogers, A. (2019). *2019 Solomon Islands National General Elections*.
- Wood, T. (2015). The Three Political Economies of Electoral Quality in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. *Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper*, 43.
- Wood, T. (2018). The clientelism trap in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, and its impact on aid policy. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 5(3), 481-494.
<https://doi.org/doi:10.1002/app5.239>
- Wood, T. (2020). The 2019 Elections: Electoral Quality, Political Inequality and the Flames of Frustration in Honiara. *The Journal of Pacific Studies*, 40(2), 6-22.
- Wood, T. (2022a). *Bringing Papua New Guinea back from the electoral brink*. Retrieved 15/12/22 from <https://devpolicy.org/bringing-png-back-from-electoral-brink-20220826/>
- Wood, T. (2022b). *What went wrong with the 2022 elections in PNG?* Retrieved 15/12/22 from <https://devpolicy.org/what-went-wrong-with-the-2022-elections-in-png-20220819/>
- World Bank. (2021). *Worldwide Governance Indicators*. The World Bank. Retrieved 8/2/2022 from www.govindicators.org
- World Bank. (2022). *World Bank World Development Indicators*. Retrieved 23/02/2022 from <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>