The Voter as Commodity: The Phenomenon of Cross-border Voter Registration in Solomon Islands

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The ANU’s Department of Pacific Affairs ran a large-scale election observation exercise in Solomon Islands prior to, during and following national elections held on 3 April 2019. Observations were conducted in 15 of Solomon Islands’ 50 constituencies by 90 observers, 77 of whom were Solomon Islanders. The research comprised direct election observations and almost 5000 citizen surveys. This In Brief is part of a series highlighting key findings that draws on data canvased in our final election observation report (forthcoming).

In the lead-up to the 2019 election, cross-border registration — that is, voters shifting their registration to a new constituency — emerged as a significant political phenomenon and a major topic of public commentary. What was going on?

In September 2018, the Office of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (SIEC) ran a national voter registration update. This gave citizens the opportunity to register for the first time or update their enrolment details. Numerous voter registration centres were established in every constituency. In Honiara, voters were able to register in a different constituency without having to travel there in person.1

The Solomon Islands Electoral Act 2018 states that voters are entitled to register in a constituency if they either live there or ‘if the person is entitled to be or is a member of a group, tribe or line indigenous to the constituency’. Thus, the Electoral Act legitimises a broad choice for voters, allowing them to register in their place of residence or in another location where they have, or can claim, ancestral or customary links. Equally, for prospective candidates, the act appears to legitimise activities aimed at encouraging or facilitating voters switching their registration to a different constituency. There is clearly scope — on the part of voters and candidates alike — to abuse the provisions of the law.

The level of cross-border registration in the lead up to the 2019 election was significant and, in some constituencies, remarkably high. At the close of the registration period, SIEC announced that it had received 54,000 applications to transfer registration to another constituency, or 15 per cent of all registered voters. SIEC data shows that registrations increased by an average of 25 per cent nationwide compared to the previous election in 2014. There was a significant range of variation among individual constituencies, from increases of 83 per cent in West Honiara and 82 per cent in Baegu/Asifola to small falls in the number of registered voters in Small Malaita and South New Georgia/Rendova/Tetepari. Neither population increase nor general population movement can account for the wide variation between individual constituencies. This strongly suggests that voters purposefully changed their place of registration before the 2019 election.

The ANU’s electoral observations provide evidence on both the supply and demand sides of this electoral equation; that is, for both ‘facilitated’ and self-initiated cross-border registration. Around one in six people surveyed by ANU observers prior to the election claimed that someone had asked them to register in a different constituency. Strikingly, when the three Honiara constituencies are considered as a whole, the result was double the overall figure, or around one in three people surveyed.

When citizens were asked why they had sought to change their place of registration, they cited a range of factors, including simple convenience, a shift in place of residence or work and the influence of family. Another common response was that citizens were eager to register in the constituency where they were most likely to receive benefits from the winning member of parliament (MP). Respondents often suggested, or made direct reference to, constituency development funds (CDFs) in their explanations. CDFs are annual allocations of discretionary funds provided to MPs for development programs in their constituencies. For example, one citizen said they attempted to change their registration ‘because for the last 12 years I haven’t received any single assistance’. Another said she had sought to change constituencies because ‘for two solid terms [she] hadn’t received assistance on school fees from [the] former MP’. Yet another stated that there was ‘no development in my constituency so I have attempted to move to another constituency’.

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At the same time, citizens surveyed by ANU observers commonly believed that particular candidates were openly enticing voters to register in their constituencies (whether or not they were ordinarily residents) through promises of gifts, cash and direct CDF benefits, such as the payment of school fees.

Citizens were also asked whether they knew anyone who was registered in their constituency even though that person lived in another location. Overall, more than one in three people answered ‘yes’ to this question. Responses to this question for individual constituencies ranged from 15 per cent in Small Malaita to over half of citizens surveyed in Maringe/Kokota. It is notable that the three highest ‘yes’ responses were for constituencies outside Honiara: Maringe/Kokota (56 per cent), North Vella Lavella (54 per cent) and Gizo/Kolombangara (51 per cent).

It should be noted that ANU observers reported that many respondents were reluctant to answer questions about cross-border registration for fear of incriminating themselves or members of their community. This suggests that the level of illegitimate (or at least dubious) cross-border registration could be higher than citizen survey results suggest.

ANU observations also showed that cross-border registration may be damaging public confidence in the accuracy of the electoral roll — and potentially in the electoral process more broadly. Overall, only 57 per cent of those surveyed said they were confident in the accuracy of the roll, with 29 per cent saying they were not and 14 per cent unsure. When those who said they didn’t have confidence in the electoral roll were asked why, the second most common response was the large number of cross-border registrations. One respondent commented ‘the registration of voters who live in this village should only be for those who are in the village and not for those who live in town and other provinces’.

A certain amount of natural movement between constituencies is to be expected between elections. Even so, the data suggest that something more than the natural movement of voters was at work in 2018–19, and that the ‘commodification’ of voters through cross-border registration has become a significant factor in Solomon Islands elections. The phenomenon is being driven partly by candidates seeking to bolster their support base; at the same time, however, our results show that many voters are active players in this process. These voters appear to be using the registration process to seek greater benefits for themselves and their families (either during the election campaign itself or afterwards — assuming the chosen candidate is successful). They see the provision of benefits to supporters as a legitimate function of winning candidates.

The introduction of out-of-constituency registration in Honiara during the 2018 registration period itself may have directly contributed to the large number of cross-border registrations by removing the requirement to be physically present in a constituency in order to register. This lends support to the idea of Honiara as a sort of ‘vote bank’ for prospective candidates.

The law governing voter registration is broadly defined and seems open to abuse. The risk is that the phenomenon of cross-border registration will become an ever-greater feature of future elections and an increasing focus of attention for potential candidates. Cementing cross-border registration as a feature of Solomon Islands’ electoral process would risk undermining the integrity, and popular confidence in the legitimacy, of that process. Solomon Islands is of course free to determine how its citizens should qualify to register to vote. At the very least, however, Solomon Islanders and their elected representatives should debate the trend towards cross-border registration and its implications for their democracy.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. Voters are still required to be physically present in their constituency to vote. Debate continues in Solomon Islands over whether out-of-constituency voting should be introduced.