

# Unspoken Rules of Politics:

## Uncovering the Motivations of Voters in Vanuatu's Elections

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Vani Nailumu, Jennifer Kalpokas Doan and Sonia Palmieri



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## Foreword

It has been a great honour for the Government of Vanuatu through the Department of Women's Affairs, under the Ministry of Justice and Community Services, to partner with Balance of Power and the Australian National University to bring you this report. This research has sought to understand the motivations that drive ni-Vanuatu citizens when they make decisions about who to vote for in the lead up to an election.

This research was undertaken in the midst of some of the most tumultuous times in Vanuatu's political history, with at least four prime ministers and potentially two snap elections in under three years. Vanuatu, like most democratic nations in the Pacific, is living in a global society that is susceptible to economic shocks, external human factors and a series of natural disasters that all contribute to the motivations of citizens in deciding how they will vote.

A second focus of this research has been to investigate why and how those decisions factor gender into the equation. We hoped to find evidence of voters' perceptions of women as capable political leaders through the interviews and focus group sessions.

Whilst successive governments have committed themselves to the implementation the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP), with particular focus on the under representation of women in

political leadership, ongoing challenges remain. Women's political representation in Vanuatu is among the lowest levels globally; only six women have ever been elected, and the current – sole – female MP was elected in 2022 after a 'drought' period of 14 years.

Supporting Vanuatu's NGEP, this research project contributes to understanding these questions. Engaging communities at the grass-roots level and with the intent of facilitating maximum candour and inclusiveness, we have sought to uncover some of the root cause thinking and social norm-driven behaviours that have led to our current political reality. Simultaneously, and with an 'action research' lens through our locally led teams, we have fostered discussions and consciousness-raising around these perceptions and norms, so that the research respondents themselves can question their legitimacy and continued value.

As we approach Vanuatu's next general election, we hope that the findings of this report will be used actively and constructively to build further understanding of the motivations behind citizens' political decision making – decisions that have a critical impact on the achievement of our country's nation-building goals.



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Director  
Department of Women's Affairs



Jennifer Kalpokas Doan  
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## Acknowledgements

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Special thanks go to all the communities visited and their leaders, the Vanuatu Skills Partnership (VSP), Transparency International Vanuatu, the respective provincial governments, youth officers, and research enumerators across the four provinces of Shefa, Sanma, Tafea and Malampa. Your willingness to participate in, as well as support, this research, in addition to your insights into the interconnected, yet complex and unique political

landscapes of each provincial and community context, enabled the core research team to carry out this study in a more comprehensive and meaningful way.

We also thank our peer reviewers for their constructive engagement with this research:

- Charlington Leo, Acting Deputy Chief Statistician, Vanuatu Bureau of Statistics
- Anna Naupa, ni-Vanuatu scholar
- Peni Tawake, indigenous Fijian partnership broker and
- Anna Gibert, political economy analyst.

This project is a testament to the primacy of partnerships, and of locally led Pacific research; we are honoured to have worked alongside all of you to complete it.

**Balance of Power** is a Pacific-led, multi-country program under the Australian Government's Pacific Women Lead initiative, working with communities in Fiji, Tonga, and Vanuatu to improve understanding and opportunities for gender balanced decision making and leadership. The program goal is that 'women are increasingly culturally, socially and politically accepted, and act, as legitimate political leaders and decision makers across the Pacific region'.

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## Executive Summary

Women are elected rarely to the Parliament of Vanuatu. When they are, they are in a significant minority. No more than two women have ever been elected at a time in a parliament comprised of just over 50 members and a number of parliamentary terms have seen the election of men only.

While research has considered this from the perspective of women candidates and representatives in Vanuatu, little research has considered the motivations of voters in casting their ballots – or not – for women. This research begins to fill that gap.

A Pacific approach to the question of democratic participation helps us to orient this project towards a focus on the motivations of voters, and more specifically, the decision making process prior to casting a vote. This approach allows us to understand both the collective's, as well as an individual's, contribution to that process, and the nature and strength of the relationships that support voters' decision making.

This research considers both the motivations of voters, but also their aspirations for more inclusive governance in Vanuatu. The research finds that voters, on the whole, are disillusioned with current political practices, rules and norms – and do want to see change. For many of the people involved in this research, there is room for women in this vision of change.

In terms of current practices of voter decision making, this research found that there are often unspoken rules determined by communities and families. Not all community and family members agree with these rules, and there are increasing pressures – both political and financial – that encourage and induce new voting

behaviours. Overall, the research finds that voters are motivated by their own understanding of community decision making processes, underpinned by tensions between traditional and democratic governance, as well as collective and individualistic decision making norms. Underlying this are sometimes contradictory interpretations of *kastom* that shape ideas of women's role in decision making.

Voters are also motivated by their own expectations of members of parliament (MPs). They expect that MPs will: be capable, defined as being qualified and of good character; demonstrate strategic leadership by supporting the growth and development of the community and province; be present, and engage with their community on the issues considered in parliament; and reciprocate voters' support by giving back and meeting the needs of both the community and individuals.

Finally, voters are motivated by their own assessment of women's potential to win. Voters make these assessments by: weighing up whether women ought to be involved in politics; considering whether women can actually serve the community in practical ways; and judging their qualifications and experience. Overall, the research finds that these assessments come with unrealistic expectations and double standards. What is applied to women candidates is not applied to men.

Yet, this research found that voters desire change. Research participants called for new, renegotiated relationships between voters and MPs, and between voters and political parties. They identified avenues of change in more transparent processes by which political parties find and support candidates – including women candidates –



and by which communities decide to support candidates. In this way, research participants suggested that there is a fundamental need for greater balance between men and women in decision making.

This research points to the need for voter education and awareness that goes far

beyond existing modules on the secrecy of the vote and the correct way to fill in a paper ballot. Programs that engage communities on their relationships with political parties and politicians, including the power they have to hold their elected representatives accountable, should be locally designed and implemented in Vanuatu.



*Woman speaking at a community forum  
Image credit: Balance of Power*

## Preface

### Political instability in Vanuatu

This research project was undertaken during a period of significant political, economic and social turmoil in Vanuatu.

A snap election was called in 2022, two years earlier than scheduled. Between September and December 2023, the country saw three different prime ministers in office. Voter frustration with a series of court challenges and parliamentary motions of no-confidence were expressed on the streets and in the media, including social media. This instability was due, in part, to governments being frequently formed on the basis of fluid coalitions between weak political parties, resulting in significant movement and change in the country's political leadership. The political system is also underpinned by traditional governance structures that are themselves quite diverse across Vanuatu. While voters directly elect representatives to the parliament, as well as provincial and municipal legislatures, the Chairman of the Council of Chiefs (Malvatumauri) and the President of the Republic of Vanuatu are indirectly elected, and the different levels of government are elected on the basis of different electoral systems (first past the post and single non-transferable vote).

In response to ongoing government instability, a national referendum was declared in January 2024 to introduce constitutional changes to prevent motions of no-confidence in parliament. The referendum vote itself took place on 29 May 2024, with a majority vote to accept the changes to the constitution. Over the course of the first quarter, an active push from government had seen a nationwide, publicly funded campaign for a 'Yes' vote, to endorse what parliament itself had passed. An equally strong unfunded

opposing campaign had also ensued, demonstrating an effective (if not efficient) democratic process.

At the same time, the country's national airline went into voluntary liquidation after years of gross mismanagement, crippling the tourism industry, a primary contributor to GDP, with significant knock-on economic impacts. In June 2024 the national Teachers' Union entered into a protracted strike protesting over non-payment of salaries and benefits, causing schools across the country to shut down. Moreover, broadening disquiet around 'brain drain' and family breakdowns linked to increasing numbers of citizens departing on labour mobility programs, called for greater government oversight.

While tumultuous, this context has stimulated the public's interest in and engagement with issues of leadership and governance. As a 'young' democracy, Vanuatu has struggled in its post-colonial journey with political party power struggles and endemic corruption undermining its nation-building aspirations. This reached a climax in 2015 when 14 MPs were jailed for treason and breach of the leadership code. Nevertheless, the increasing civic engagement and demand for better leadership – widely observable during the referendum campaigns – and enhanced consciousness by citizens of their role in bringing this about is a sign of hope for our country's growth. This includes greater questioning around traditional conceptualisations of women's leadership legitimacy and why negative models of political leadership continue to prevail when it is ever clearer that they are not conducive to our collective well-being.



*Wilson Toa facilitating a community forum  
Image credit: Balance of Power*

## 1. Introduction

In 2022, at a snap election, Gloria Julia King secured a seat in the national parliament of Vanuatu – the first woman to do so since 2008. In fact, since independence in 1980 just six women have been elected, and to date, only two of those women has served more than one parliamentary term (Hilda Lini and Isabelle Donald).

Not only do very few women get elected in Vanuatu, but very few women run as candidates. The proportion of women contesting seats has not exceeded 10 per cent in the past three elections: women comprised 3.8 per cent of all candidates in 2016 (10 women); 6 per cent in 2020 (17 women); and 3.2 per cent in 2022 (7 women).

Previous research has uncovered common systemic barriers faced by women in getting elected, including their limited financial resources in an electoral environment that increasingly favours candidates who can provide material benefits to the electorate, and political parties' reluctance to endorse women candidates (Donald et al. 2000; Ilo-Noka

and Dalesa-Saraken 2010; Howard 2020). Some of the more challenging experiences of individual women candidates in Vanuatu has also been documented (Palmieri and Zetlin 2020: 5-6).

Little research, however, has specifically considered the motivations and decision-making processes of ni-Vanuatu as voters, and the way these impact on women's electoral chance of success. As our research shows, however, these motivations – and the expectations voters have of their elected representatives – are a big part of the story of women's continued non-election in Vanuatu.

Taking its cue from a blog written by Jennifer Kalpokas Doan in 2022, this project aims to fill this research gap. Kalpokas Doan expressed a longstanding curiosity about the 'rules of the game' that continue to see women marginalised from political decision making. What are these rules? How were they developed? Is there a consensus in communities across Vanuatu about how they operate?

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*The way politics is played in Melanesian countries has very little national inclusivity about it – in terms of participation by and representation of both men and women at the national level. The role of women is, almost exclusively, to vote, not to actively play the game itself.*

*And because men occupy that ... space, they are the ones who make and dictate the rules.*

*How do we change community and voter mentalities from expecting material benefits to a new culture of demanding more accountability and better services from elected members? How do we shift demand from a transactional short-termist view of leadership to a desire for truly transformative governance? (Kalpokas Doan 2022)*

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Two broad questions shape this research, namely:

1. What explains the motivations of ni-Vanuatu voters to elect candidates?
2. What would inclusive, transformative governance look like in Vanuatu?

In answering these questions, the research uncovers two interesting findings. First, that many of the rules that govern voters' decisions are often unspoken. In fact, it became evident in the process of undertaking this research that our questions gave communities – men and women, young people and elders – a unique opportunity to articulate publicly the rules they use to navigate their decision to vote. It was also clear that these unspoken rules are not always agreeable to, or endorsed by, everyone in the community. Tensions are evident in the way individuals and communities navigate these unspoken rules.

A second major finding is that the rules that are written down – including in the Constitution of Vanuatu and the Electoral Act – often go unheeded. These include rules around the secrecy of the vote and the universality of the electoral franchise. These perhaps more internationally recognised norms of democracy remain contested in many communities around Vanuatu, with important ramifications for both individual voice and agency in the electoral practice of voting, but also for the integrity of those processes.

### 1.1 Structure of the report

This report is divided into five sections. The first three sections frame our answer to the first research question. We find that voters are motivated by: their own understanding of community decision making processes; their own expectations of MPs; and their own assessment of women's potential to win.

Many ni-Vanuatu decide how they will vote based on their understanding, and acceptance, of their communities' decision making rules. Broader questions shape this understanding – what is the nature and purpose of governance in Vanuatu? What is the relationship of traditional governance to democratic governance? What is the role of the collective, as opposed to an individual, in decision making? Voters' decisions are also influenced by their own political socialisation, or the process by which someone learns political values and affiliations primarily through their family. In Vanuatu, this is commonly referred to as 'born/die'. This research finds that underpinning all these questions are individuals' interpretations of *kastom*.

Voters in Vanuatu also make decisions based on expectations of their elected representatives. Four sets of expectations were uncovered. First, that MPs be 'capable'; that is, that MPs have relevant education qualifications and be of strong moral character. Second, that MPs show strategic leadership by improving growth and development in their communities. Third, that MPs be present in the community so as to understand their needs and represent them in parliament. Finally, voters participating in this research expected their MPs to respond to their individual needs as a form of 'democratic reciprocity'. Consistently, across all these expectations, voters in this research expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with their elected representatives.

Having established community expectations of MPs, the research participants were encouraged to reflect on the feasibility of electing women to parliament. These discussions surfaced numerous contradictions and double standards: what appeared to apply to male candidates did not apply to female candidates. When ni-Vanuatu voters assess

a woman's potential to win an election they tend to take into account whether she: should be in politics; can actually serve and represent their community; is sufficiently qualified to run; and has the support of both women voters and the broader community.

Sections 4 and 5 answer the project's second research question. For participants, inclusive, transformative governance in Vanuatu involved a stronger role for women in parliament. In achieving this, participants often called for renegotiated relationships across the political system between the three key sets of actors: voters, political parties and members of parliament (MPs). More specifically, participants considered three strategies that might see stronger relationships between voters and parties (more transparent inclusion of women in party processes), voters and MPs (greater community agency), as well as between parties and MPs – or parliament more broadly – (reserved seats). Finally, inclusive, transformative governance requires a greater balance of power between men and women. Communities considered there was a need to redefine the roles and responsibilities of men and women in ni-Vanuatu society, and the related norms of leadership which have traditionally seen this in the hands of men.

## 1.2 How to read this report

The data presented in this report was collected from three sources: a

questionnaire, open community forums, and semi-structured interviews (see Section 6 for a full description of the methodology). Much of this data is expressed as quotes coded as either 'Interview' (having been captured privately in an interview) or 'Forum' (said publicly during one of the community forums), followed by the province in which the data was collected. Given that many of the communities visited have small populations, each community is coded numerically rather than named by town. Questionnaire data is presented as graphs, and usually disaggregated by gender or age. Participants were asked whether they were 'male', 'female' or preferred 'not to say'. Graphs are presented in order of female respondents' views.

The data was validated with a selection of participants and observers in August 2024. In general, workshop participants validated the findings of the report and comments raised during the day are reflected in the report in shaded boxes.

Importantly, the findings of this research are not representative of all people across Vanuatu. As detailed in the methodology section, participants were not selected randomly across every province. Rather, participants were purposively selected according to a set of criteria. While it is possible that similar findings might be found in other provinces and communities, we do not seek to make those generalisations for the whole country.

## 2. Understanding community decision making processes

Many ni-Vanuatu decide how they will vote based on their understanding and acceptance of their communities' decision making rules. This research asked participants about the 'rules' around voting in their community; most trusted sources of advice when deciding how to vote as well as sources of information; and when they came to make their vote decision.

This research uncovered that these decisions are often framed by three intersecting 'lenses' or ways of understanding the particular practice of casting a ballot at election time.

- The first lens is an ongoing conversation about the nature and purpose of governance in Vanuatu and the relationship of traditional governance to democratic governance. Communities in Vanuatu remain structured, at the village level, along traditional governance lines with a chief and community leaders, including church leaders and teachers. The role of these traditional leaders in a democratic system of governance – composed of an elected parliament and prime minister, separated by an executive and a judiciary – continues to be a source of tension.
- The second lens, closely related to the first, is the understanding of the process by which decisions are made and adhered to, being either collective or individual. Voters need to navigate their own sense of the purpose and benefit when they vote, be it for their families and communities, or for themselves as individuals.

- A third lens is an individual's political socialisation, or the process by which someone learns political values and affiliations primarily through their family. In Vanuatu, this is commonly referred to as 'born/die'.

Always underlying these three lenses, however, are individuals' and communities' interpretations of *kastom*, particularly as it relates to women's contribution to decision making in elections. *Kastom* is a term in Vanuatu's lingua franca, Bislama, to mean all forms of cultural heritage, practice, and traditional knowledge, including place-based practices and relationships (see, for example, its definition in the Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy 1992 and Mahit 2016). We now explain these three lenses, and the role of *kastom* in the interpretation in each.

### 2.1 Traditional and democratic governance

As a communal society, governance in Vanuatu is **traditionally** seen as being led by a chief and community leaders. The research found that this communal understanding of governance is also reflected in the way that communities vote, particularly in rural and remote areas. Moreover, in patriarchal communities, women's votes are more likely to be decided upon by men.

In the islands, there are tribes in the community. The tribes have sub-committees. So, in those tribes, it's the same language, there is nothing to hide. So, we all mutually agreed on one candidate to vote for. This is different from a community; the community looks at the whole

population in the area. Whereas a tribe is ancestral (Interview 5, Shefa 1).

At independence in 1980, Vanuatu established a **democratic** system of governance. The Constitution provides for a parliament (chapter 4), a head of state (chapter 6) and executive (chapter 7) and a judiciary (chapter 8). The electoral franchise is 'universal, equal and secret' (chapter 1, article 4, paragraph 2).

It was observed that some community elders were calling for a *kastom* governance, where the chiefs and community leaders should be the sole decision makers. In discussions, a preference for *kastom* governance was associated with failed promises from candidates and MPs; the perception that the current voting system had yet to deliver positive results; and the perception that irrevocable clashes between democratic and traditional governance systems were to the detriment of traditional approaches.

The Westminster system is killing *kastom* rule (Forum, Sanma 4).

There is already a governance system within the *nakamal*; when the well-educated come to influence us, the chief no longer uses the *kastom* system (Forum, Tafea 2).

*Kastom* is embedded in traditional governance systems, and this also contributed to some voters' assessment of the role of women in deciding whom to vote for in elections. In one of the clearest articulations of this, a man at a community forum in Sanma province exclaimed:

I've not paid for your bride price so you can go and talk in parliament! (Forum, Sanma 4).

In Tafea province, however, one community member expressed his view that there were internal contradictions inherent in *kastom* – and religious – interpretations of women's contribution to politics:

Someone asked me in Tanna recently why I voted for a woman. My answer was that culture is a stumbling block. If you are looking down on women, why are you sending your daughter to school? Men are just using culture to hold on to their power. Religion is also a stumbling block. We use texts in the Bible to hold women back. But God created two people. A woman is changing our community. If a man can do it, a woman can too (Forum, Tafea 2).

I don't agree with the saying that, in Tanna, women can't talk. I don't agree with it, because women have great ideas to lead the country. What men can do, so can a woman. It's good because it now draws a line between *kastom* and politics. In politics women can talk, but in *kastom*, women can't (Interview 5, Tafea 2).



## 2.2 Collective and individual decision making

A **collective** understanding of voting is when a preferred candidate is discussed and approved by a group of people. This could be a community, it could be the church congregation, it could be the extended family unit, or a couple. An **individualistic** understanding of voting is when the decision to vote for a candidate is based on personal preference and individual autonomy.

Collective decision making relies on the influence and power of authority figures in communities. Community dynamics and pressure from within the community also influence the vote.

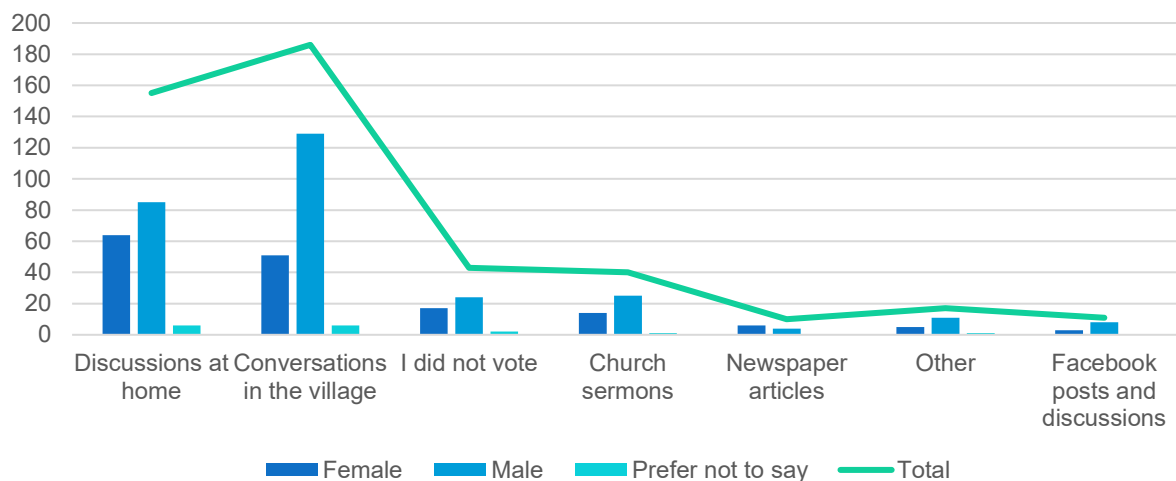
But when the chief speaks, he speaks on behalf of the whole community. So, it is the people choosing (Forum, Tafea 2).

Because we have families, we connect with each other, we are related to each other, so there are no secrets. So, if a chief chooses, we all together agree. Even the leader and the church leaders in the community, they agree, that is where everyone agrees (Interview 2, Sanma 3).

When asked about the information used to decide who to vote for, research participants were more likely to say, 'discussions at home' and 'conversations in the village', signalling the importance of community decision making (see Figure 1).

We are more informed now – it's all around us – families are able to discuss and choose a candidate together (Forum, Sanma 3).

Figure 1. What information do you use to decide who to vote for?



Source: Questionnaire (n=384), data disaggregated by gender.

Again, permeating understandings of collective decision making are interpretations of *kastom*. Across different provinces, participants explained how women, in particular, were expected to follow the community's decision:

When you see a man speaking, he is speaking on behalf of women as well (Forum, Tafea 2).

We women are like trailers. We are just giving a number to men (Forum, Sanma 4).

And yet, while communal decision making remains common practice in many communities, the research uncovered an increasing tendency for voters to vote their 'own way'. Rather than voting for a collective goal – such as independence – voters are also choosing to vote according to their own personal choice. This could be based on a perception of a 'transactional' benefit (as evident in some of the quotes below), or on a more contextualised understanding of the role of an MP and the ideas and aspirations represented by a particular candidate.

I vote because I want something for myself, for example, money (Forum, Sanma 4).

From the year 2000, people started voting on personal interest; people had previously voted for the development of the country (Forum, Sanma 2).

It is common that you either vote for personal reasons or for the community; but voting for personal reasons is becoming the more dominant motivation (Forum, Sanma 3).

Before, there was unity [we all decided together], but now it's just individuals (Forum, Malampa 1).

### 2.3 'Born/die' political socialisation

Community forums across various provinces heard from individuals who had strong connections to a political party, often described as 'born/die', which determined how they vote at each election. This political allegiance relates mostly to parties that were established pre-independence: specifically, the Vanua'aku Pati (VP) and Union of Moderate Parties (UMP). The sense of loyalty is to parties that achieved a significant milestone for

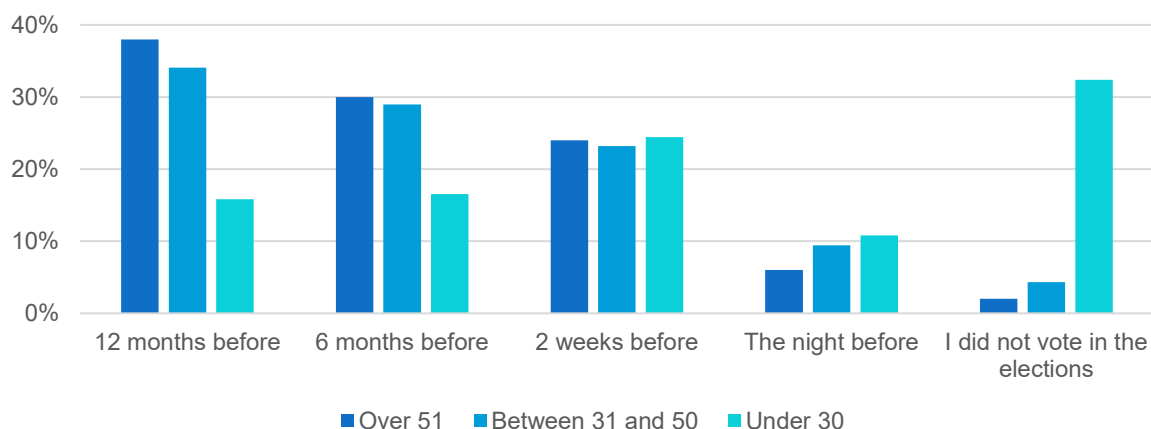
Vanuatu, rather than because of their new policy agendas.

One of the rules is born/die. Especially for the VP because that is the party that took us to independence (Forum, Tafea 1).

Born/die VP. It is very hard to change to another political party (Forum, Tafea 2).

Not surprisingly, this allegiance appears strongest among older voters. As shown in Figure 2, older voters (almost 70 per cent) indicated that they made their decision about which party to vote for at least 6 months before the election, while younger voters (under 30) were more likely to decide two weeks, or the night, before.

Figure 2. When did you decide how you would vote in the election?



Source: Questionnaire (n=380), disaggregated by age.

Overlaying this lens with *kastom*, the research found that for women, the concept of 'born/die' often becomes 'marry/switch'. For instance, a woman's political allegiance can change when she marries into a family that has strong connection with one particular party, different to her own family's.

During the 2022 elections, I followed whatever decisions were made between my in-laws. When I married into this family, one of the relatives contested. I had my candidate in mind, but they said to vote for him because he is family ... they urged me to vote for that relative because he has helped the family several times, even though I

did not want to (Interview 7, Tafea 1).

Women have built networks among themselves, but they are scared of their husbands (Forum, Sanma 2).

Family political blocks decide women's votes (Forum, Sanma 2).

These tensions between the traditional and democratic, the communal or collective and the individual, the old and the new, permeated all the discussions in this research. In the view of one participant, there was a need to see stronger distinctions:

We have to understand that politics is not *kastom* (Forum, Tafea 1).

Figure 3. How do Ni-Vanuatu voters understand vote decision making processes?

	1. Traditional versus democratic governance		2. Collective versus individual incentives		3. Political socialisation	
<i>Kastom</i> interpretations of women's role in decision making						
Key influencers	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Democratic</i>	<i>Collective</i>	<i>Individual</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief</li> <li>• Community leaders</li> <li>• Spouses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political party</li> <li>• Campaign managers</li> <li>• MPs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief</li> <li>• Community leaders</li> <li>• Church leaders</li> <li>• Family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Social/media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Political party influencers</li> </ul>	
Gains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders' (men's) status &amp; position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active participation</li> <li>• Representation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective goods, e.g. materials for church, community hall, roads, clinic, school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual goods, e.g. rice, iron roofing, food, kava, alcohol</li> <li>• Agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family reputation</li> </ul>	
Challenge	<b>Secrecy of the vote</b>		<b>New sources of advice</b>		<b>Bribery &amp; party proliferation</b>	
Losses	Leaders' authority in community	Leaders' accountability to community	Leaders' authority in community	Voters' respect of community peers	Voters' connections & reputation	

Note: The figure presents the three overarching tensions evident in voters' decision making discussed in this section: traditional or democratic ideas of governance; collective or individual incentives; and longstanding obligations to political parties. The figure is meant to be read downwards through the columns representing those tensions.

### 2.4 Decision making tensions in practice

Tensions erupt when groups and individuals clearly lose something as a result of an election process and outcome (see Figure 3 above). These tensions are evident in three specific voting trends (or challenges) across the communities studied: the first is in relation to the tendency of votes cast in Vanuatu to be known, rather than secret; the second is in relation to the increasing prominence of political parties (and their agents) in influencing vote decisions; and the third is in relation to ever increasing bribery in the vote process. In each case, participants expressed the need to conform with

community, family or party pressures for fear of exile, ostracization or political backlash.

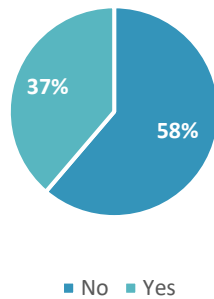
#### *Voting in secret?*

Despite the constitutional assertion of a secret ballot in Vanuatu, 58 per cent of those interviewed believe that their votes are not cast in secret (see Figure 4). The communal system of decision making, coupled with the strength of family ties, means that political affiliations and vote decisions are common knowledge within community circles. This was a common theme uncovered in community forums across different provinces:

Others knew because I went inside with this guy who is also a brother to show him proof of the candidate I voted for (Interview 3, Tafea 2).

I told everyone. I felt so privileged to tell others (Interview 5, Shefa 2).

**Figure 4. Do you think your vote was cast in secret?**



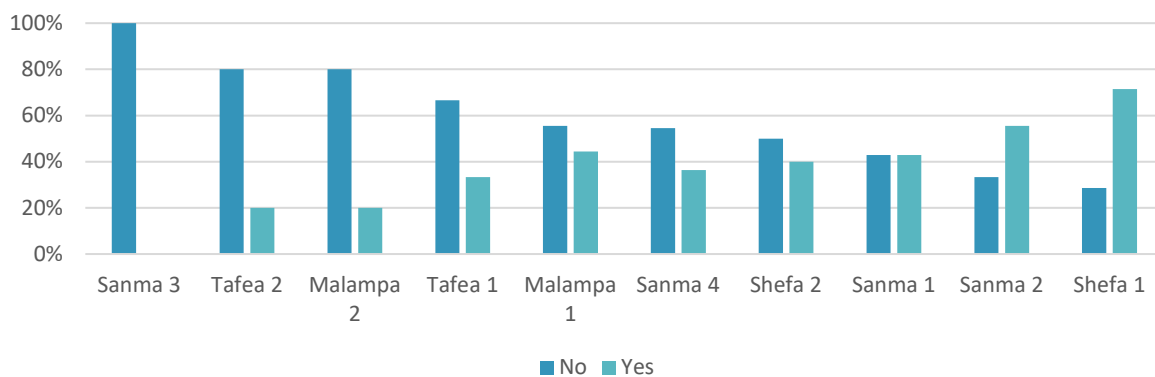
While democratic ideals are premised in individuals' freedom to vote in secret, political parties were seen as posing a challenge to that secrecy. Interviewees in Sanma province referred to the longstanding practice of political parties and their representatives watching voters in polling stations on election day. This is also evident when interviewing others in various communities:

Source: Interviews (n=84)

This small room, that is all by yourself to make your decision, it's no longer safe. When you are there, all these people are standing around and looking at you. Because when you get in and get out, everyone already knows. This small room is all by yourself, but when you get out everybody knows how you voted (Interview 6, Sanma 4).

With a list, they know. Let's say you and me, you will be the person chosen to be where you are going to sit with other representatives, other parties – the agents – oh, this guy is from a party, so you just tick, so they already know what you have said. In the months leading up, they have already visited you and they know who you are. They've convinced you with a lump sum of money, you know food, or material things, so they know very well who their voters are. That's the problem! It's not confidential. If you don't come and vote today, they will come and check 'who did you vote for?' Or 'where did you vote?' Yeah. That is exactly what is being practiced here (Interview 2, Sanma 3).

**Figure 5. Do you think your vote was cast in secret?**



Source: Interviews (n=84), data disaggregated by community.

In one of the four Sanma communities visited, 100 per cent of those interviewed confirmed their vote was not cast in secret at all, and that they had been asked to prove who they voted for. Similarly, an interviewee in Shefa province spoke of the illegal practice of secretly bringing out leftover pictures from polling stations to confirm their vote to a particular candidate:

Some people ... might take left over pictures out of the polling station. I am not quite sure how the police officers are monitoring that and if that is happening or not, but I know for sure there were some candidates who were doing that, looking for proof that, yes, I voted for you. But it is against the law, but it's the compliance part of it with the police officers, whether people do take the leftovers or not, that's something else (Interview 1, Shefa 1).

Community forums uncovered that the collection of cards by party agents is widespread. Political parties use this practice to gauge the potential number of votes they might receive from a particular polling station. Additionally, communities are sometimes offered money, food, and other items in exchange for their electoral cards. This practice has also led to voter intimidation by party agents who hang around the polling station. A participant in one of the community forums in Sanma revealed that political party agents at polling stations attempt to influence voters to cast their vote for a specific candidate before they actually vote.

[woman] Some of the members of the political parties collect people's voting cards. They asked for mine, but I told them they don't have this right (Forum, Tafea 1). [Researcher

observation that none of the men disputed her].

In addition to voting having become a known practice, some research participants shared that they felt increasingly pressured by their communities to vote in a particular way:

The constitution says it is our right, but with the current politics... we have people going around collecting cards, or the mutual agreements, and the camps cause our votes to no longer be kept secret as before. There are people who would judge you, so people become very cautious when making their votes. ... I have voted for someone who lost the elections in Aniwa; I faced a lot of backlash for my decision and was criticised too. We were also manipulated into voting for some of the candidates who were not registered in the islands, on the grounds of the help they have been giving us. This was a challenge for us; although we had a candidate to vote for, we were reminded of our debt to these Port Vila candidates. So we just had to vote for them (Interview 10, Tafea 2).

Of course, not all research participants felt the secrecy of their vote had been compromised. Just over one third of those interviewed (Figure 4) believed their votes were cast in secret. This view is grounded in their belief that they have a constitutional right to cast an independent ballot and that this is their democratic duty for their country.

I vote on my own decision, because when I am inside the small room, it's just myself. The law gave me my

right to vote, and it's secret. I made the decision to vote because I observe their campaigns, heard their policies and their national priorities. So, I choose according to what I see and hear during the campaigns and made my decision (Interview 2, Shefa 1).

### *Voting with new sources of advice?*

In communal decision making, particularly in remote and rural communities, it is not surprising that key influencers have been chiefs and other community leaders, including from the church. This research uncovered that there are interesting differences between women's most trusted sources of advice, and those of men. The research also found that political parties are increasingly influencing vote decisions, even in rural communities.

### *Gender differences in trusted sources of vote advice*

The women surveyed in this research indicated that they trust the advice of their husbands slightly more than the surveyed men trust their wives in making a vote decision – 65 per cent of women, compared with 60 per cent men, trusted their spouse's advice 'a lot' (see Figure 6). Community forums heard more about the nature of that 'trust'; in many communities, it was clear that the advice from husbands was more directive than suggestive:

50 per cent of the voters are women, but they still had no voice. A lot of these women voted according to their husband's wishes, not according to their own rights (Forum, Shefa 2).

You people never come to us and say 'there is a woman here, vote for her'. All you say is that we should follow you to vote for men, for what you want (Forum, Sanma 3).

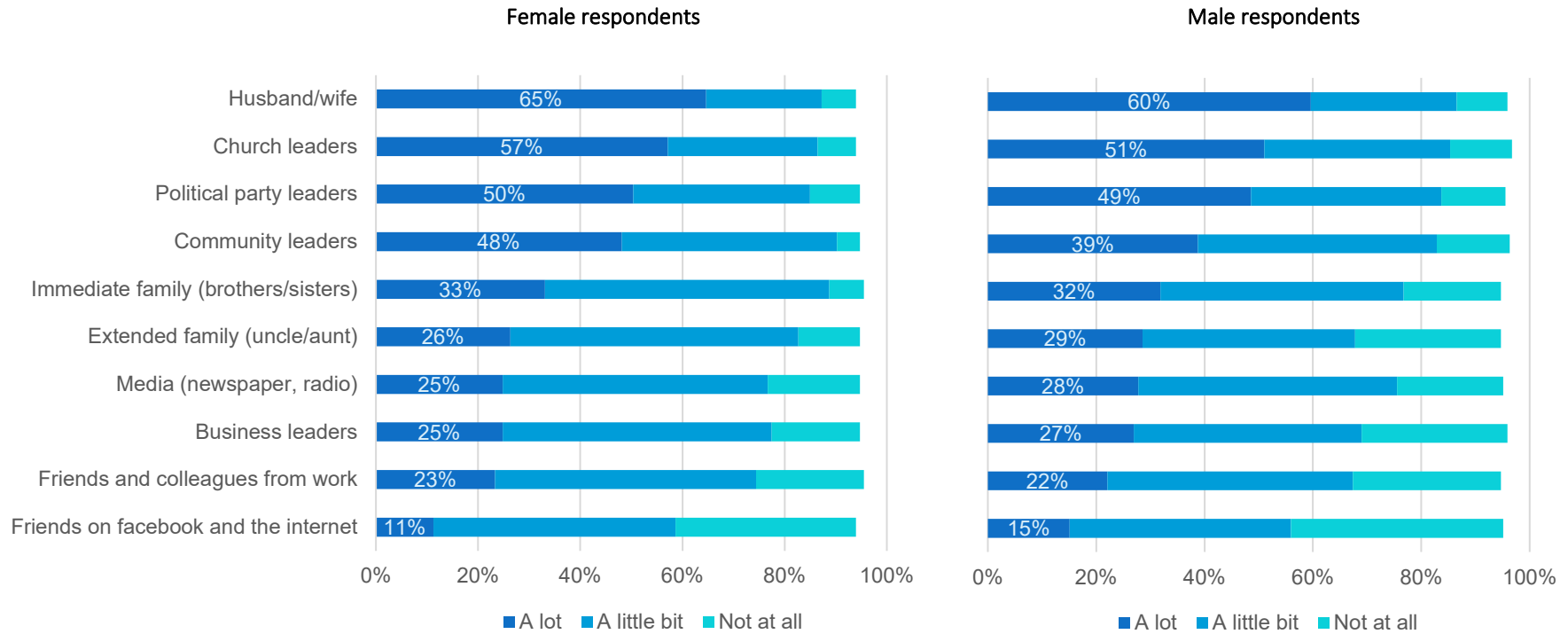
Women value the advice of church leaders slightly more than that of political party leaders and community leaders.

I am fulfilling my right to vote. I listen to my pastor and my community leader (Forum, Tafea 1).



*Seman Dalesa Saraken interviewing a participant*  
Image credit: Balance of Power

Figure 6. How much do you value the advice of...?



Source: Questionnaire, data does not reach 100% because of non-responses.



Women research participants indicated that they have little trust in the advice provided through social media and traditional media outlets. Indeed, it appears that women trust people more than 'information mediums' when deciding how to vote. This was well expressed in one of the community forums:

Women vote for people that they know; that they have walked past or know. Men vote for those who come close to them, who don't just give them kava, but give them money to pay for the kava (Forum, Shefa 1).

While men appear to value advice from their wives, they also trust community leaders and church leaders. However, men's level of trust in these individuals is not as great as women's: while 57 per cent women respondents trusted church leaders 'a lot', 51 per cent of men did.

It is possible that men's reported trust in the advice of their wives encompasses the broader discussion between spouses at home on preferred candidates where husbands tend to strongly endorse one candidate over another. Women in various community forums commented on how candidate preferences were heavily influenced by men in the family:

It is good to follow the father's decision first because he is the head of the house. After their four-year term, if the candidate does not do their job well, then we can follow the mother's decision (Forum, Shefa 1).

The self-interest of someone else, e.g. my husband. When he says, 'this way', then that's it (Forum, Malampa 2).

In one community, it was noted that when there is a difference of opinion between spouses, an alternative strategy might be used:

Sometimes the father and the mother will debate, and there will be a decision to split the vote (Forum, Malampa 2).

Men relied less on the advice of social and traditional media, but more so than women, potentially indicating their greater exposure to and use of these information sources.

There are repercussions for not following family advice. In some instances, if a family member votes for a candidate not agreed upon, they are forced to leave the house.

When I voted for someone who was unsuccessful, they evicted me from the house (Interview 6, Malampa 1).

### [The evolving role of cultural leaders](#)

While chiefs have traditionally had a strong role in influencing the community's vote (Bolton 1998, Tabani 2019), in some communities at least this seemed to be increasingly challenged. In a community in Sanma province for instance, some of the community members noted that 'the Chief can tell us what to do'. Similarly, in a community in Tafea province, an interviewee explained that 'often the chiefs or the head of household can exile the one who voted outside their decision' (Interview 5, Tafea 2). A less punitive interpretation of the chief's influence was presented in Sanma province where one interviewee noted that:

Because we have families, we connect with each other, we are related to each other, so there are no secrets. So if a chief chooses, we

all together agree. Even the leader and the church leaders in the community, they agree, that is where everyone agrees (Interview 2, Sanma 3).

But not all chiefs or community members agreed that chiefs and other leaders had this influence on the community's voting decisions.

The chief can say something, the priest can say something, the pastor can say something, but this is all just advice (Forum, Malampa 1).

We had one nomination in the community, someone who is doing everything helping the community, and when it came [back from] the *nakamal*, that's when it came to a [family] block, and that's when it started to divide the whole

community. So in that, the chief has no more power. If the chief says we need unity, people have decided, that no, we have decided, family block, we want this candidate. That's where the chief doesn't have the power to decide for the election (Interview 6, Sanma 2).

Some participants shared that when community members went against the advice of church leaders, they had a strategy to manage any potential repercussions of that decision:

The number of voters may drop, and that affects attendance in communities, like in church. When people didn't vote according to the advice of the church, they didn't attend church for a month (Forum, Sanma 4).

### **Box 1: Trusting community advice following forced relocation**

In one of the communities visited, participants expressed the view that their vote decisions were not their own.

The landowners are given the responsibility of choosing a candidate, with strings attached – they can kick us off the land (Forum, Sanma 3).

We purchased land from the landowners here, so we have to listen to them. And they are a bit different ... we purchased the land. But there are threats. (Interview 1, Sanma 3).

So let's take for example, on that side, they have someone who is, or claims to be a landowner, over here there are three claiming to be landowners here. And they are the ones who are saying that they should give the [advice] on who to vote for. Well of course, in previous elections, we had some business houses so like, small *nakamals*, sometimes when the landowner is disappointed, they just come and put what we call *namele* leaf, it's a sign where we say, 'stop doing business'. Put it in front of the store (Interview 2, Sanma 3)

### Young people want to find their own voice

Young people in urban communities where social structures are less defined tend to rely less on the advice of community and church leaders. In these communities, the role of the chief and community leaders has been diluted in part because of the of the 'mixed' nature of these communities. Mixed communities are those where people have migrated from other places to build a new home (e.g. in Sanma 3), rather than those composed of people who are originally from that place (e.g. Sanma 2).

In our community, the youth have one language: when we decide on something, that is the way we are going. Before somebody wants to stand [for election], they must 'clear their path' first before we can trust them. They can help out in the community, help people (Forum, Shefa 1).

Conversely, young people in rural and remote areas rely less on the advice of those community elders when the system appears to fail them:

The young people, before we would follow our 'big people', but then when there are blockages or it doesn't go through, now it's just individuals (Forum, Malampa 1).

While comparatively rare, a few young people nominated friends as a trusted source of advice when it came to voting time. As one of the interviewees from Tafea province explained, friends' advice was accepted so as to ensure harmony in the friendship circle, rather than because of the persuasiveness of a particular candidate:

A few years back after voting, my friends became distant and told me off. So, today, when there is an election, I follow whatever they [friends] say (Interview 6, Tafea 2).

Differences between young women and young men were also observed by one of the interviewees who worked closely with youth in his community in Sanma:

The young girls who have to make their decision, they have been talking to their mothers. But for the young boys, it's closer to their group [of friends]. Because at the end of the day, like I said, if the candidate gets through [that is, wins] what they get is mostly for the group, not the family or the community, it's just for the small group [of friends] (Interview 6, Sanma 4).

### Political parties as emergent source of voting advice

For voters of all ages, however, political parties are an increasingly strong source of voting advice.

From the beginning I had someone in mind to vote for. But as the election day drew near, so many opinions flew in from other people, I became confused. They all preach their promises, yet to this day they don't fulfil it. So, I am confused; every time they come and sugar coat their policies, I become convinced that they are the right leaders (Interview 10, Tafea 2).

A community rule here is to have party camps who will then choose a candidate to help us with development. But sometimes these roles are making us disregard the rights of individuals. The political officers, the chiefs, and the chairmen of these parties are influencing the voters in communities (Forum, Tafea 1).

The chief calls on the community to choose a candidate. It's the

people’s choice. But camps are set up around the village where people can eat (Forum Sanma 2).

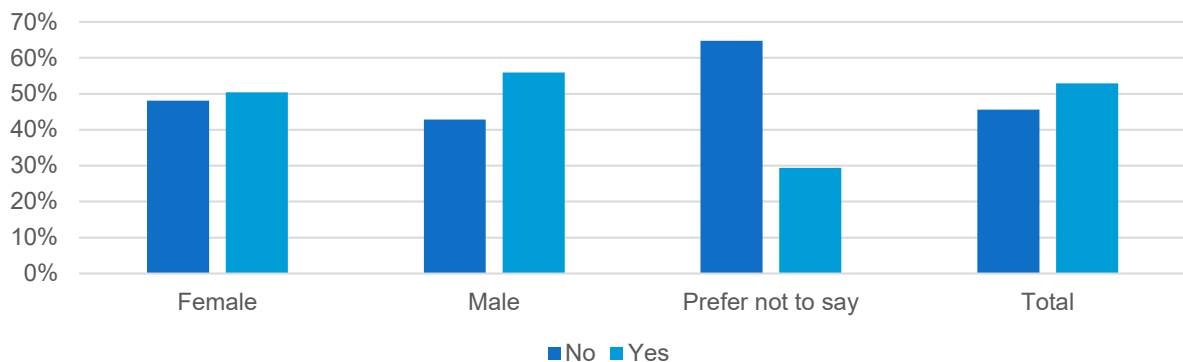
*Voting in exchange for vatu?*

Research participants highlighted the increasing proliferation of political parties contesting elections in Vanuatu and the effect this has both on democracy, and on voters’ decision making processes.

Today there are too many small political party groupings that are causing a lot of instability inside the parliament (Forum, Tafea 1).

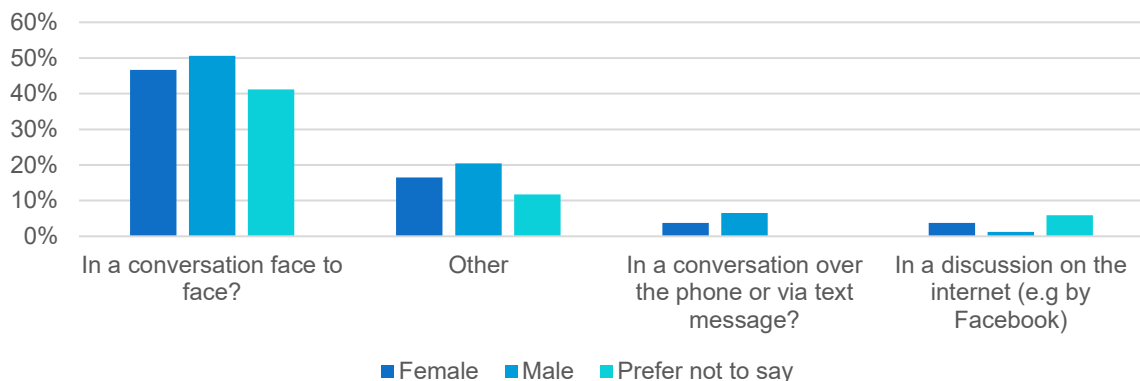
Responding to the questionnaire, men were slightly more likely to suggest that political parties had tried to persuade them in person (55 per cent ‘yes’, 41 per cent ‘no’) while women were more evenly split (50 per cent ‘yes’, 48 per cent ‘no’; see Figure 7). Those respondents who preferred not to share their gender identity were more likely to suggest that candidates and political party agents did not try to persuade them to vote in a particular direction (over 60 per cent responding ‘no’). Respondents overwhelmingly reported that where a candidate or party came to persuade them to vote, this was done ‘face to face’ (see Figure 8).

**Figure 7. Did a candidate or someone from political party try to persuade you to vote for them during the campaign?**



Source: Questionnaire (n=391), disaggregated by gender.

**Figure 8. Did the candidate or the person from a political party persuade you...?**



Source: Questionnaire (n=299), disaggregated by gender.



Wilson Toa and Telstar Jimmy facilitating a community forum  
Image credit: Balance of Power

This study confirms other research that during the election period bribery has become commonplace (Veenendaal 2021, Forsyth and Batley 2016). Voters are swayed to support a specific candidate through monetary inducements and this has become a significant challenge to traditional political allegiances and political socialisation. Individuals openly admitted in community forums to accepting money for their votes, suggesting that this practice is widely acknowledged. In some instances, chiefs were also offered money so they could influence their people to vote for a particular candidate.

People line up in the sun because *vatu* [money] has been paid (Forum, Sanma 3).

The influence from the past snap election, there are many candidates who come using money to bribe (Interview 2, Sanma 3).

For instance, bribery occurs towards the chiefs (Forum, Sanma 4).

While bribery has become commonplace, not all family members benefit from this practice. During a community forum in Malampa province, participants revealed that this practice is more common among men – as the head of the household – who receive cash from candidates or party agents and then instruct their family on who to vote for without sharing the money.

The mothers just follow the fathers' decisions but the benefits only go to the fathers, like paying for his kava. But the mother, who went to suffer in the sun, did not gain anything (Forum, Malampa 2).

Someone in the community will ask others to 'give him a number' [of promised votes] but at the end of the day, he is the only one who

benefits [from the candidate/  
elected MP] (Forum, Malampa 2).

Over the years, voters who have actively participated in elections since the country's independence have noticed a significant shift in their voting attitudes and expectations. They have observed a change in the dynamics of electoral decision making, with an increasing emphasis on candidates offering financial incentives in exchange for votes. This shift in focus has led to a diminished consideration for the country's development during elections, as monetary concerns have taken centre stage in the electoral process. A participant in Sanma 3 said, 'When people give us money, we don't think about development'. But this participant was not alone in expressing a concern for Vanuatu's future development; these concerns were also heard in other forums:

In Aniwa, we are no longer voting for the future. Even though we may have good morals, when they start passing money to you, you start voting for someone else (Forum, Tafea 1).

Since independence, my vote has been based on values, but after that, values have been eroded. For me to make that choice, people have come and paid me to make a choice (Forum, Sanma 3).

The role of candidates and political party agents in this practice was discussed in a community forum in Tafea province which was attended by a former MP. In this forum, the former MP explained that the practice of offering money to buy votes had become a burden for (some) election candidates. Voters' expectations of receiving money from candidates have led candidates to feel obligated to give out cash in order to increase their chances of winning an election. This activity frequently

occurs on the night before an election. The practice has become widespread, and even voters who did not expect money from candidates have also benefited from this practice.

There is a hidden rule: the hidden rule is bribery. If we do not do this, we lose. This happens especially the night before elections (Forum, Tafea 1).

We were happy to just vote for them, but they were the ones who wanted to give us money (Forum, Tafea 2).

Young people, in particular, had different expectations of what political parties should give them in return for their support. With limited connection to the ideals of independence, young people need alternative reasons to support political parties with the same kind of 'born/die' allegiance of older generations. Young people's expectations, however, were not always matched by political parties, as one of the interviewees explained:

The other thing is that those groups of young people might have some links to someone who is close to decision makers in the political party. Some of those decision makers promise positions. The political party is promising one of the young people who knows that man, they are promising them that 'if we get through, you have to come and work in this position'. This is what also helps them win the trust of the young people. Because at the end of the day, those young people just want food and drinks. But especially, it's for food, kava and alcohol (Interview 6, Sanma 4).

The expectation that political parties will gift food and kava during the campaign

period was also seen as a social disruption, causing conflict and disharmony in many communities:

It is very dangerous to eat at a different camp (Forum, Tafea 1).

But sometimes, you know these people, we call them *nawita* [octopus] – you know it changes its colour – they can be talking frankly to you, ‘oh thank you very much for this and this’, but just before the election, just before maybe the

hour before the election, that’s when the *nawita* changes its colour. All these weeks sitting together, just a few seconds, to change ... when another block or proposed candidate comes in ... it’s sort of like bribery. (Interview 6, Sanma 2).

[Facilitator:] We are enemies for two weeks during the campaign, but family again after the election? [Community laughs and says, ‘Yes!’] (Forum, Tafea 1).

Table 1. Data validation reflections, Section 1

	Shefa	Sanma	Malampa	Tafea
Are you surprised by this data?	<i>We are surprised that 58% of respondents say the vote is not cast in secret</i>	No	No	No
Is the data reflective of discussions in your community?	<i>Yes, we have a lot of experiences similar to those captured in this data</i>	<i>One thing that has been around in the community is that the men decide which women will contest</i>	<i>Figure 3 (How do Ni-Vanuatu voters understand vote decision making processes?) captures the reality in our communities</i>	
Are there any points that you think we should add?	No	<i>Church needs to agree on which woman should contest The church is not influencing enough</i>	<i>To address secrecy of the vote, we need to have more discussion and awareness on civic education, which is often very limited  One motivation could be the social environment, circle of relations and friends; voters may sit on the fence and decide to vote as per the language they could relate to</i>	<i>Voters must have right motives to vote</i>



*Wilson Toa and Telstar Jimmy facilitating a community forum  
Image credit: Balance of Power*



### 3. Expectations of MPs

Voters in Vanuatu also make decisions based on expectations of their elected representatives. In this section, we draw on responses to questions about what voters ‘look for in a member of parliament’; what they understand as the ‘responsibilities of a member of parliament’; and whether they were ‘still happy’ with their decision in the snap election. To understand these expectations from a community perspective, forum participants were also asked to reflect collectively on the community’s overall satisfaction with the MP.

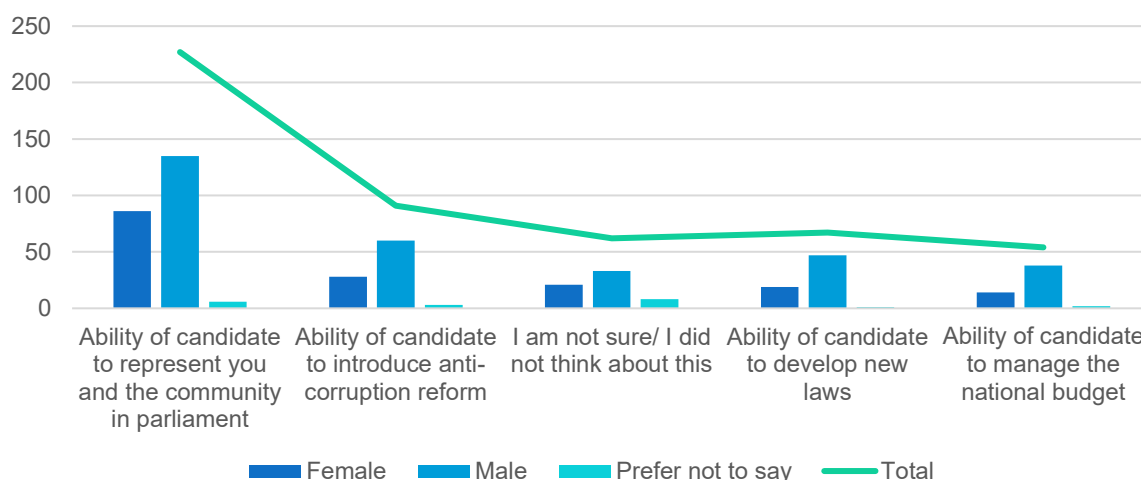
Four sets of expectations were uncovered. First, that MPs be ‘capable’; that is, that MPs have relevant education qualifications and be of strong moral character. Second, that MPs show strategic leadership by improving growth and development in their communities. Third, that MPs be present in the community so as to understand their needs and represent them in parliament. Finally, voters participating in this research expected their MPs to respond to their individual needs as a form of ‘democratic

reciprocity’. Consistently, across all these expectations, voters in this research expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with their elected representatives.

Figure 9 illustrates a consensus among individuals of both genders participating in community forums that an MP should possess the ability to advocate for and represent themselves and their community in parliament. Furthermore, they expect candidates to demonstrate their capability to propose legislation, particularly with a focus on enacting reforms to combat corruption.

Interestingly, the majority of respondents in the question do not prioritise a candidate's ability to manage the national budget and develop new laws as essential qualities for an MP. Additionally, some respondents acknowledged that they do not consider the abilities of an MP when evaluating candidates. A participant in Tafea said ‘I don’t know the work of the parliament, especially the role of an MP. And the government keeps changing anyway’ (Forum, Tafea 2).

Figure 9. What do you look for in a Member of Parliament?



Source: Questionnaire (n=387), data disaggregated by gender.

### 3.1 Capability: qualifications and character

The research findings indicate that voters have specific expectations and criteria for electing candidates with regard to their roles in parliament. These expectations were consistent across the various communities in which the research was carried out.

When considering a potential candidate for parliament, voters take into account the individual's track record of contributions to their province, communities, and families. This can include their involvement in local initiatives, support for community development, and efforts to address the needs of families.

Someone who you can see their footsteps in the community; oh, like a civil servant, a teacher, someone who has helped and supported the community (Forum, Malampa 1).

In a number of community forums, the age limit for MPs was discussed. A participant in Shefa 2 for example emphasised the need to take into account the age of candidates who wish to run for election. According to the participant, individuals aged sixty years or older should not be eligible to contest an election due to the demanding and highly responsible nature of the role of an MP.

There needs to be an age limit [as part of the criteria] because the load or responsibility in parliament makes them die quickly from the stress. The age limit should be 60 (Forum, Shefa 2).

During the community forums, the qualifications and education levels of MPs was brought to the forefront. In Shefa 2, a participant recommended that the government should establish clear education criteria for MPs, particularly in

relation to their responsibilities in parliament, such as discussing bills. This would ensure that they are well-prepared for their roles (see quote below from Shefa 2). In Sanma 2, a participant observed that MPs play a crucial role in facilitating development and securing funding, which underscores the importance of their level of education.

The government needs to have some criteria, especially in education. Because they talk about bills in parliament, they need to know their job (Forum, Shefa 2).

When candidates/MPs are better educated, they will be able to make better decisions, facilitate development, and negotiate funding/budgets (Forum, Sanma 2).

Interestingly there is an expectation for female MPs to have studied politics at university, while no such requirement exists for male politicians. The reasoning behind this expectation was based on the assumption that they do not understand, and are not interested in, politics. The same assumption did not appear to apply to men. For male MPs, the only expectation is to have a high level of education.

A woman candidate would need to go to university and learn about politics, so it would be difficult to get a woman in parliament (Forum, Sanma 3).

While voters generally expect their MPs to be highly educated, they also prioritise a candidate's ability to address the specific needs of their community. If an individual can effectively meet the needs of the people in a community, voters may be less concerned about their level of education.

People also support those MPs who can meet the needs of the people

even if they don't have tertiary qualifications (Forum, Sanma 2).

Voters expect their MPs or electoral candidates to be morally upright. Concerns were raised that once a candidate enters parliament, they may forget their moral compass.

They should be God-fearing, because when they go into parliament, they start having too many partners (Forum, Shefa 2).

For some research participants, the only woman elected (at the time of this research, in 2023) to parliament met these expectations relatively easily:

During functions, some of these MPs never take their wives with them because they don't want their wives to know about their secrets. But the MP we voted for, wherever she goes, the husband goes (Forum, Shefa 2).

In discussions with individuals from Santo and Tanna, it was noted that during elections, voters cast their ballots with the expectation of electing a leader. However, they have observed that upon entering parliament, the elected individuals shift their focus from leadership to pursuing their own business opportunities.

I vote for leadership, but it only lasts a short time. They become businesspeople when they get elected (Forum, Sanma 3).

I realised that when it comes to leaders, there are leaders in the community and there are also business leaders, and I have to weigh my trust between the two (Forum, Tafea 2).

### 3.2 Strategic leadership: supporting growth and development

A common expectation from voters raised during this research is that MPs should support the growth and development of their community and province, once they are elected to parliament. The expectations relate to the constituency represented by an MP, whether it is in a rural or urban area, and the presumed development needs of that constituency (usually spread across three or more islands).

Whoever we vote for in rural areas must be able to understand rural issues (roads), and those voted for in urban areas need to understand urban issues (salaries) (Forum, Sanma 4).

I only completed my education to class 6, but I am trying my best to vote in every election so that development will reach me (Forum, Tafea 1).



*Wilson Toa and Seman Dalesa Saraken facilitating a community forum  
Image credit: Balance of Power*

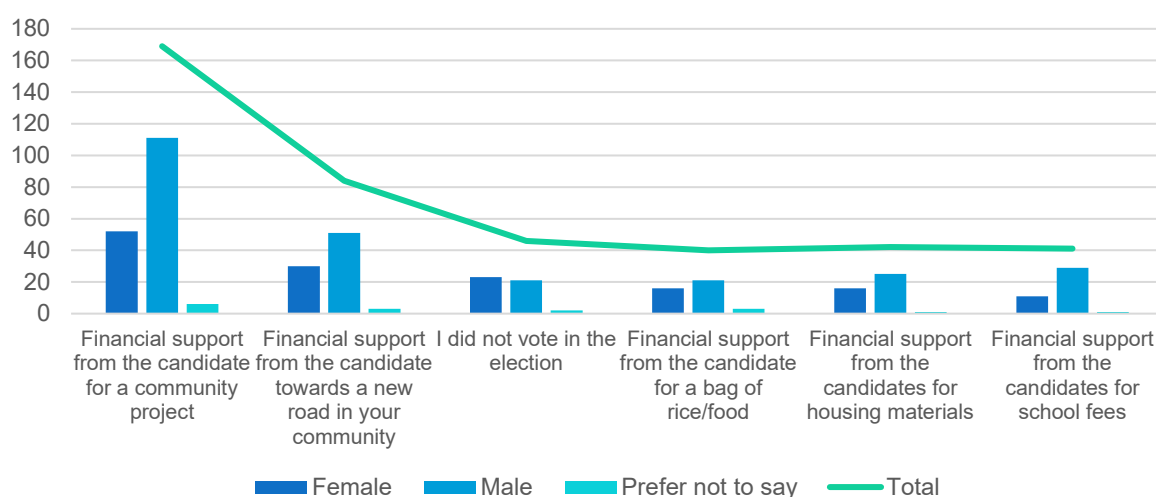
### *What development looks like*

In community forums, discussions sought to unpack the meaning of 'development'. While there were usually broad interpretations (roads, education), some community members had more specific ideas.

When a sick person goes to Vila and dies, the family has to struggle to bring their body back. But the people in parliament should just upgrade our hospitals here (Forum, Tafea 1).

The questionnaire asked participants about key determinants of their vote decision, from financial support for a community project to support for school fees (see Figure 10). Of those surveyed, financial support for a community project was most often selected for both men and women, followed by financial support for a road in the community. This indicates that community development remains a very strong predictor of vote choice. Less important is financial support for a bag of rice, housing materials and school fees. Candidates' support for school fees has become less critical since government subsidies for schools were introduced in 2018, with support of international donors.

Figure 10. Were any of the following important in determining your vote?



Source: Questionnaire (n=359), disaggregated by gender.

### MPs as the first source of help in a disaster

In some communities, there was a strong theme of MPs being primarily responsible for a community’s recovery after a natural disaster, such as cyclones, volcanic ashfall and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. While relief was understood to come from Government through its ‘Clusters’, voters expected MPs would be the first to come to their aid.

The MP should be the first person I see after a disaster because I voted them in. Because I cast my vote for them. The government can come after. The [disaster] cluster can come next (Forum, Shefa 1).

Faced with the challenge of increasingly frequent disasters in Vanuatu, voters have come to see their vote as a transaction in exchange for an emergency handout from their MPs. Representing the view of the community, one participant in Tafea province openly acknowledged that ‘disasters have damaged our natural houses, so we voted for iron roofing’ (Forum, Tafea 2).

Interviews also uncovered, however, that this transaction only works in practice when

the MP knows his support base. Participants noted that when delivering disaster relief supplies, some MPs provide it solely to their party members and known supporters, disregarding the rest of the community. As explained in an interview in Sanma province:

I will give an example: after the COVID-19, our MP here ... had to give food to people in the constituency. What happened is that they got the food in the truck, the big lorry, and they just drive past the place that didn’t vote for them. They just passed by. They just dropped food at the place where they know people voted for them. And this is really happening after COVID-19 and TC Harold (Interview 6, Sanma 4).

For some participants, this increasingly transactional expectation of representation was also seen to come at the expense of more strategic leadership that would bring more targeted growth and prosperity to communities. In this sense, voters’ own expectations of their leaders had led to significant disappointment.

I am not happy (with my MP) because as you can see from the moment you arrived, the road, the airport, the wharf, everything is not good (Forum, Malampa 1).

For as many years as I've been in this community, and for as many elections that I have voted in, development is still not happening (Forum, Sanma 3).

### 3.3 Presence: Engaging with community

Research participants expected their elected representatives to be more present in the community and engage with their constituents in a two-way dialogue. MP presence was identified both as a means by which communities might share the reality of their daily life and concerns and by which MPs might also share their experience of working in parliament. However, MPs, particularly those representing rural areas, were rarely seen by the communities that elected them.

#### *Shift in how MPs usually operate*

MPs' absence was seen as a shift in how MPs used to work. Some surveyed communities noted that, in the past, MPs would engage more with their communities, particularly in consultation processes. Participants suggested that today, MPs tended to travel to their communities for official visits only, despite known MP travel allowances. This absence has also eroded trust between communities and their MPs.

In the past, MPs used to consult with us. I know they do have travel allowances to travel to us here, but now they only come for official visits (Forum, Tafea 1).

When they came and talked to us, we trusted them. But when they failed to

keep their promises, we lose trust in them (Forum, Tafea 2).

To help their province grow and voice the concerns of the grassroots in parliament and come back to us to talk about it (Forum, Tafea 1).

#### *Relating absence to accountability*

Communities expressed frustration with MPs' absence; a common point was raised that this absence made it difficult for communities to keep their representatives accountable for their actions – both in parliament and in the community. The communities visited in this research wanted their representative to explain why they voted a certain way on bills in parliament, and often expressed an interest in engaging with their MP so as to have the opportunity to share their own points of views on those policies and legislation being considered in parliament. Presence did not necessarily mean MPs were expected to live in the community; but they were expected to know them. Community forums heard from individuals who were disappointed in their leaders who did not necessarily understand or relate to their context. Without frank and honest engagement, communities were left with the feeling that most of the promises made during an electoral campaign are just enticements to gain votes from the people.

He needs to come and tell us what is happening in parliament so that we can achieve our community goals. For example, school, health facilities (Forum, Sanma 3).

MPs should tell the voters what's happening in parliament, about the laws that are being developed, and find out what the community wants (Forum, Sanma 2).

I am not happy because my candidate has not come back to

visit us until now. Lying is not a good thing. You told us your policies, but you never came back to deliver for them. You added your own thoughts and promises on top of the policies, just to entice people (Forum, Tafea 1).

[I expect my MP] to not forget about the people, come back and see how people are living and then help. But not to go and live in town [Port Vila], buy land there and forget the people who voted for them (Forum, Malampa 2).

### *Better understanding the work of parliament*

Voters expressed an interest in being kept up to date on parliamentary debates so that they could learn more about the role of an MP. The research uncovered that a significant concern for many of the communities surveyed was the lack of information about what happens in parliament or the broader work of an MP.

Many of us do not know that the role of an MP is to make laws (Forum, Sanma 4).

In principle at least, a number of community members valued the presence of a representative, regardless of their gender. As expressed in one of the communities in Shefa province, supporting a female candidate was not as great a concern as ensuring that the leader engaged with the community:

I don't doubt anyone, man or woman. Everyone is equal. But in the event that a woman wishes to play the role of a leader in the community, and help the society, for sure, the youths would help her to become a councillor. We would vote

for someone who would not turn their backs on us, so that they may have this strong relationship with [our] community (Interview 7, Shefa 1).

### **3.4 Reciprocity: supporting voters' individual needs**

Finally, the research uncovered voters' expectations that MPs would meet their individual needs, not just those of the community as a collective (as noted in section 2.2 above). Supporting these individual needs was seen as a form of legitimate electoral reciprocity. Voters had elected an MP; that MP should therefore support those voters in managing their specific needs and expenses, particularly in areas where there are limited opportunities for employment.

People vote to receive something from an MP. For example, I heard that someone in [a different community] voted for an MP for their son's circumcision ceremony (Forum, Malampa 2).

For some participants, this expectation of reciprocity was closely linked to the work they had personally done to ensure the victory of a candidate. These individuals referred to the significant effort it had taken them to secure a candidate's election, and which consequently earned them a reward:

This is how I am going to say it: I was his gardener inside the community. I had to make sure my proposed candidate did something for the community to earn the people's trust for this snap election. Once the campaign was successful, we made sure that the candidate does not forget us, because through my people and I, he won the election. It

is just as simple as it is (Interview 7, Shefa 1).

As with expectations of community development, expectations around individual reciprocity were also often met with disappointment. Responses from community forums highlighted the disconnect between the (possibly great) expectations of voters, and the actual return of support from MPs.

I thought our MP was a quality person who understands the needs of the community, but he doesn't see us, or address our needs (Forum, Sanma 4).

All I want is that when I ask for something, it will be given. Otherwise, when he comes back to talk, I will chase him away (Forum, Tafea 2).

The people of Tafea are tired of voting but they still want something that they can touch with their hands (Forum, Tafea 1).

MPs' lack of reciprocity resulted in the commonly expressed phrase *'mi no hapi'* [I am not happy]. Indeed, some participants expressed the view that rather than supporting individuals in their communities, MPs were misappropriating their constituency funds; that is, MPs were seen to be looking after themselves.

When an MP is elected, they only think about themselves, not the community or the nation (Forum, Sanma 2).

In my view, the allocation is being eaten by just one person. They provide a report that it has been given, but only one person takes all of that money or food (Forum, Shefa 1).

Even when community members expressed disappointment, some recognised that this demand for reciprocity could impose a level of difficulty on MPs.

We always want something back and that makes it hard for the people in parliament (Forum, Tafea 1).

I used to be a councillor before, and my trousers were always falling down because of people's requests (Forum, Tafea 1).

While some participants were willing to 'wait and see' before they changed their vote at the next election, others were more definitive in their dissatisfaction:

I am not happy, but I will wait for a year and a half before I decide (Forum, Shefa 1).

If they don't think of me, that's fine, I have my own garden, I am not worried about him. But when he comes back, I will never vote for him again (Forum, Tafea 2).





*Family participation in completing a questionnaire  
Image credit: Balance of Power*

## **Box 2: Electing a woman in Mele: expectations met**

*What are the rules of voting in this community?*

Families met together and they invited the candidate to talk to us. Before we went house to house, and community to community, we asked the 8-10 political parties to put their flags down for all of us to go for just one. This only happened in the last snap election.

In the past, those 8-10 other political parties had their own camps in the village. But in the last election, the whole community understood this new rule – from babies to elderly people in the village.

Our advantage is that this is a very big community. And we were able to get the numbers. We knew about the work that Julia had been doing in the community with her husband.

Julia's 1600 votes came from Shefa. About 1000 of them were from women. And many of those women had not voted before. 700 of those votes came from outside of Mele. More than 50% of the votes from Mele were women. The women pulled themselves together, they really meant business and they worked hard for the votes. They did a lot of the work. Many of the men came just to drink kava. But there needs to be a woman to talk about the issues of mothers/women and their rights, to go into parliament.

We went from house to house to share our ideas with people. We put the chiefs aside, we put political parties aside.

There were political party camps, but only two were in Mele. There was a lot of eating together and talking together.

*How do community members feel about the election, 6 months later?*

I can see that there has been a big change in this community. Our thoughts are becoming a reality. It hasn't been a year yet but we are already starting to receive things.

[What are these things?] The donors have come. They are helping with the projects, the training for our women. So I know I voted right.

I see a big change happening. During disasters, we saw help coming. I'm glad we voted for someone who is not afraid to talk on our behalf and take our voices into parliament.

Some were not happy. But then slowly they started to pull back and come back to the community. They came to realise that we voted for the good of the community.

Table 2: Data validation reflections, Section 2

	Shefa	Sanma	Malampa	Tafea
Are you surprised by this data?	<i>We are surprised that the voters did not expect their MPs to draft, discuss or support policies that will benefit them</i>	No	No	No
Is the data reflective of discussions in your community?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are there any points that you think we should add?	<i>Candidates should disclose their financial status before elections, their health</i>	<i>MPs should return to live in their constituencies; voters expect MPs to take more responsibility in mentoring a potential woman MP</i>	None	<i>MPs must encourage gender balance during party congress and campaigns</i>

## 4. Assessment of women's potential to win

Having established community expectations of MPs, the research participants were encouraged to reflect on the feasibility of electing women to parliament. Participants were asked what would it take for 'this community to elect a woman', and 'do women support women candidates?' These discussions surfaced numerous – and perhaps previously unspoken – contradictions and double standards: what appeared to apply to male candidates did not apply to female candidates. In this section, we outline the process by which research participants assess women's potential to win an election when making a decision about whether or not to support her. This assessment takes into account whether women: should be in politics; can actually serve and represent their community; are sufficiently qualified to run; and have the support of both women voters and the broader community.

### 4.1 Should women be involved in politics?

Premised mostly in interpretations of *kastom*, participants often discussed the appropriateness or otherwise of women's involvement in politics. For some, women had no role in political decision making:

Parliament is like a *nakamal*. Only men should be allowed to go inside (Forum, Shefa 1). [Observed buzz from women in the community forum.]

Because by the culture of Malekula, we pay for women [bride price] not men (Interview 1, Malampa 1).

The custom laws of Tanna prohibit a woman to be voted into parliament. Because the things she'll speak on will be what men would normally talk about in parliament (Interview 9, Tafea 2).

Religious beliefs also served as a strong justification for women's absence from politics.

God does not allow women to stand up and lead (Forum, Sanma 4).

The Bible says that women should only remain in the house, so that is why it's hard for them to go in [to parliament] (Forum, Shefa 1).

Women's potential involvement in politics was seen to come at a loss for the social order, with participants in each province expecting women to remain in the kitchen. In some cases, this political involvement was seen as too great a social change.

I asked an old man what his thoughts were, and he said, 'if women go into parliament, who will prepare the food in the kitchen?' (Forum, Shefa 1).

Our culture does not put women at the front. People understand that women belong in the kitchen, that she is at a level below men (Forum, Sanma 4).

We can say all we want about gender equality, but in *kastom* the woman is not allowed to go into the *nakamal*; she belongs in the kitchen (Forum, Malampa 1).

I think it would be good to vote for a woman. But the idea that men are the head of the household, and whatever decision they make we [women] follow, has become a custom (Interview 6, Tafea 2).

We are not criticising the women, but if they go into parliament and they keep moving [up], who will say that is enough? (Forum, Tafea 1).

Importantly, however, community forums also allowed for some open contestation of these ideas from both men and women.

God has already done it [made women leaders], but you guys do not realise it. Sometimes, the women perform their responsibilities and also carry out men's responsibilities and roles. The women are doing so much and

doing it so well that they are even doing the work of men now (Forum, Tafea 1).

We are talking about *kastom* here now, but we are already walking all over *kastom*. Today a lot of women have progressed more than men, and one day, one of them may even become the prime minister (Forum, Malampa 1).

We talk about *kastom*, but a lot of women have already taken on other leadership roles (Forum, Sanma 3).

These women have been given the same right to stand for election. The law is for all of us. If they want to go [into parliament], let's stay home and cook! (Forum, Tafea 1).



Research participants considering their responses to the questionnaire  
Image credit: Balance of Power

## 4.2 Can women serve and represent the community?

Research participants considered whether women could serve their community and represent their interests in parliament. Participants in community forums often raised the requirement that women candidates 'prove' themselves before contesting an election. Relevant experience in this regard might include women's ability to support the everyday running needs of the community, such as gardening and building repairs, but also an interest in politics. On this, however, there was disagreement expressed between men and women in the forums:

It would be better for women to prove themselves first as being able to work for the community. Men cut the wood; women can't do that. [Woman in the back responds:] Are you kidding me? Women do all that work! The *mamas* have done all that the men have done. Many male MPs have not reached university, but they still get voted in. Women already know how to manage their households, while men drink kava every night (Forum, Sanma 3).

We felt that there is not a lot of involvement of women in politics, they don't talk about politics, it's mostly the men who talk about politics. [Woman responds:] How could you say that? In the last election it was the women who were going door to door, campaigning (Forum, Sanma 2).

If women face double barriers, the husband will question her choice [to contest an election]; the man is the boss and decides. The key point is that the proposed woman candidate has to prove herself

before she contests an election. [Woman responds:] But a man could come out from nowhere, doesn't need to prove himself, and still go through! (Forum, Sanma 3)

Forums allowed participants to acknowledge that women not only contributed to community development, but that in many cases, they did more work than men.

Because in this community, the men are forgetting their roles as leaders of this community. They are sitting back ... the majority of women are involved in activities in the community and in the church as well. One of the spokespersons said that when you go to church, you can see no men, only women in the church. And that's very true as well. I am a church elder too (Interview 4, Sanma 2).

In [our community], we had five candidates, all men. We continue to say that women must work inside the community to gain trust and not play personal politics. But these men don't do what women are already doing in the community (Forum, Sanma 2).

Women were often seen as the ones putting their hands up to serve their community. As one youth officer noted:

If I have an organisation calling me and asking me if I have to find some youth volunteers for a program, then I have to go around and find youth leaders and tell them I need this number for a group. And the youth president would have to give me some contacts and it's from there that I've noticed that this [young woman] is the one. Because you will see that she's very active.

She will call people, she will say ‘you know this guy who you told me to call, but he didn’t turn up, what should I do? I should find the other one?’ And when she starts doing that, I know oh, this girl is interested. She is one [who] is showing passion to her community and her youth group. This is what I have been noticing. And nowadays, those who are the most active are not the boys, they are the girls. Young girls (Interview 6, Sanma 4).

Community forums also provided participants the opportunity to acknowledge women’s contribution in the

home as a form of decision making. It was commonly noted that households rely on the advice – often in the first instance – of the *mamas*. As one participant noted, the complementarity seen in the way mothers and fathers make decisions at home could well be replicated in the national parliament:

At home, you need both the mother and the father. So, I think in parliament, you need both the father and the mother. I would be very glad to see more *mamas* going into parliament in the next election (Forum, Shefa 2).



*Sanma Youth Officer, Johnny Varengale, interviewing a participant at sunset*  
Image credit: Balance of Power

### 4.3 Are women qualified for politics?

The double standard in voters' assessments of women candidates' relevant experience was noted in most of the community forums held across the four provinces. This extended to the idea that women candidates running for the first time were unlikely to be good representatives. For example, when one man in Sanma explained that he had not voted for a woman 'because she was a first-time candidate', he later conceded that he had voted for a male first-time candidate (Forum, Sanma 1). He was not the only voter to share this view.

Across the community forums, participants did not consider that women candidates had sufficient educational qualifications to be elected. As one person in Malampa province noted:

Personally, I don't think I trust a woman, because often they don't choose well educated women to contest for parliament. So, it is better to have someone who is educated, and knows more about law (Interview 4, Malampa 2).

A woman candidate would need to go to university and learn about politics, so it would be difficult to get a woman in parliament (Forum, Sanma 3).

This research found that women candidates are also judged on their moral character and perceived virtue more harshly than men. In community forums held in Sanma and Malampa provinces, individuals expressed a preference for women candidates who are either single or widows because they were perceived as less likely to incur a 'husband's jealousy':

It has already happened in Malekula, but afterwards she had a broken home. She went in, she saw

money and made her own wrong decisions and then the other political parties ridiculed us for voting her in, so I didn't do that again (Forum, Malampa 2).

In this sense, some voters appeared to internalise women's private behaviour as a negative reflection on their decision-making and choice of candidate, although this did not appear to apply to the private lives of male candidates and representatives. When voters heard of rumours (true or false) of women candidates' extra marital affairs, they were more likely to stop supporting her than male candidates, similarly accused.

We did put a woman into parliament, but when she had a bad picture [extra marital affair] we stopped supporting her (Forum, Malampa 1).

In women candidates' defence, however, some research participants noted that women could bring a different skill set to parliament. One person in Sanma province, for example, noted that women 'are able to see things differently – from the details to the big picture' (Forum, Sanma 3).

### 4.4 Do women have the support of other women?

The research explored the expectation that women candidates just require the support of women voters to win an election. Two themes appeared in these discussions across the four provinces visited. First, women voters do not support women candidates because they are not usually empowered to make their own vote decisions (as noted in section 1, above). Second, rightly or wrongly, women voters who do not support women candidates are perceived as being 'jealous' of other women's leadership aspirations.



### *Women's lack of vote agency*

Interestingly, during the research, very few participants highlighted that the problem of electing women into parliament is because men don't vote for women. All the blame is directed at women, even though they know that men are the ones stopping women from voting for other women. For example, a woman interviewed for the research in Malampa explained that she just followed her husband's decision as he did not trust her to make her own decision on who to vote for. Another respondent in Malampa explained that if women are allowed by their husbands to vote for women, they can easily elect women into parliament. But it was acknowledged that men still make the decision on who to vote for, resulting in the lack of women being voted into parliament.

No. I follow my husband's decision. [Why?] Because days before election, he would inform me on who to vote for. Like he has someone in mind already. ... My husband does not trust me because sometimes he might think a woman alone can't do it (Interview 3, Malampa 2).

I think it is hard because people are not educated enough about women. If women were able to vote for women, I think there would be a woman inside. But I think it is also because it is the men who make the decision on who to vote for (Interview 7, Malampa 1).

We have put a woman to stand in the provincial elections and I was part of the campaign team. A lot of women knew of her, but they did not vote for her (Forum, Tafea 1).

In a community forum in Sanma 2, a woman stated that the responsibility for the lack of women being elected to parliament should not be solely placed on women. Men

should also be held accountable because they typically take the lead during election campaigns.

Really you cannot blame the women for not voting for the women. It's the men who drive the whole thing (Interview 6, Sanma 2).

Some voters lied to her that they would vote for her, but didn't (Forum, Sanma 1).

Men do not have a lot of trust in women. But if you trust men, you should also trust women (Forum, Malampa 2).

### *Women's perceived jealousy*

Blame for the lack of women in parliament was commonly attributed to women voters' jealousy. A research participant in Sanma commented that women are not happy about another woman's success especially when a woman contested for election, which has led to feelings of jealousy.

Women are jealous of other women who are running, doing better than them (Forum, Sanma 1).

Research participants have also commented that women often do not recognise or acknowledge the leadership capabilities of other women. In Malampa, a participant attributed the lack of support for female election candidates to the attitudes of women. Similarly, in Tafea, a participant involved in a campaign for a female candidate in a provincial election noted that although many women were familiar with the woman candidate, they did not vote for her.

Women don't see the capacity of other women to take up leadership (Forum, Sanma 4).

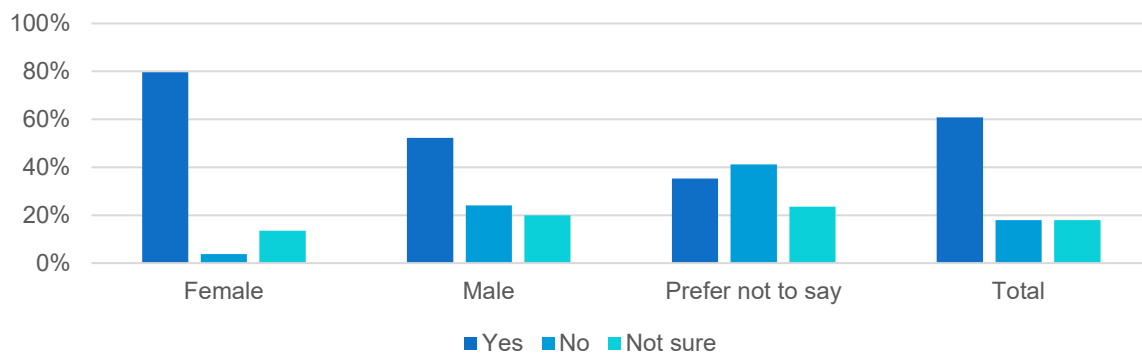
Women have this attitude about not wanting to support a woman, especially if she's from another village or community. There was a woman who ran in [another community]; her numbers were good, but her campaign did not reach the women in the central part of Malekula (Forum, Malampa 2).

And yet, when research participants were asked if they could vote for a woman running in their constituency, women were far more likely to say 'yes' than men. While 80 per cent of the female respondents indicated that they could vote for a woman, just over 50 per cent of male respondents said they could. Participants who preferred not to identify their gender were the most likely to say they would not vote for a woman (see Figure 12).



*Telstar Jimmy, Seman Dalesa Saraken, Sanma Assistant Secretary General Carol Ravo, Vani Nailumu and Sonia Palmieri at the Sanma Provincial Government  
Image credit: Balance of Power*

**Figure 12. If a woman ran in your constituency, could you vote for her?**



Source: Questionnaire (n=395), disaggregated by gender.

Even when men acknowledged their role in women’s absence from parliament, they still tended to blame women for not working together, fielding too many women candidates in one constituency, rather than working together to select and field only one candidate. The continued double standard in voters’ support for women is noted in most of the community forums held across the four provinces. For example, in Shefa 1, it was highlighted that there is a problem with men not supporting women, yet men still continue to blame women for not being able to elect more women into parliament.

Ever since I started voting, I’ve found that women themselves are not working together. That’s how I see it. The women are not working together. Port Vila, there’s only 5 seats. And before the election, maybe 6 months before the election, we hear that there is only going to be one woman contesting. Candidate lists come out, 11 women, 12 women are contesting the election in Port Vila constituency, with only five seats. So, from how I see it, for women to come together to support one candidate, to help her get through, that never happened. That’s the reality. And sometimes when you get to plus all the votes at the end

of the day, even if you just need another 50 or another 100, then we’re putting one woman inside the parliament, it is the women themselves that ... so we can say, yes, there is a problem with men not supporting women, but also women not supporting women (Interview 1, Shefa 1).

During one of the research interviews, a man noted that the Vanuatu National Council of Women’s (VNCW) Office did not effectively negotiate to secure endorsements for women before they could run in the election. They suggested that women should not run for election unless they were endorsed by VNCW. When asked if this rule applied to men, a participant in Malampa responded with a ‘no’.

There wasn’t good negotiation between the [National] Council of Women to take the right decision and the need to endorse her. [Does the same rule apply to men?] No (Forum, Malampa 1).

In some communities, women were clearly open to being nominated as a candidate, but knew that they required support from others:

... women have to share their opinion, they have to propose

somebody. If they propose me, then I will contest. If they don't propose me, then whoever they propose, then that is the person (Interview 4, Sanma 2).

#### 4.5 Do women have the support of political parties?

Finally, voters assess whether women candidates have sufficient support from political parties when contesting elections.

On this there were also double standards and contradictions. Women were encouraged to run for political parties, but not all parties encouraged the candidacy of women, and where there was support, it was sometimes tokenistic:

I also campaigned for a woman candidate in the last election. This woman tried to run for a political party, but they refused her. So, both the men and the women are to be blamed (Forum, Tafea 1).

[Discussion raises the example of a woman candidate who stood for [a party] but was not fully endorsed by [the party].] [That party] ran her to split other candidates' votes (Forum, Sanma 3).

Perhaps because political parties have not demonstrated strong support for women candidates, most of the seven women candidates who contested the 2022 elections ran as independents. However, none of these women were elected.

I campaigned for my sister-in-law – it might have been a question of affiliation – she contested as an

independent; maybe she needed to run under a political party (Forum, Sanma 3).

Political party support, however, remained closely related to community support. As with their male counterparts, it is vital that women candidates get prior endorsement from the community before they contest. For example, a community forum in Sanma province expressed that:

These are the same women [contesting the elections]. They keep nominating, but they didn't ask the opinion of the community or the bigger group of women (Forum, Sanma 3).

Before contesting, this woman was not able to support others in the community (Forum, Sanma 1).

Similarly, other participants from the various community forums had also underlined the common theme on the necessity of community support for women so as to increase their legitimacy and visibility for their campaign. Thus, getting the community's support and endorsement reaffirms the need for women to put in twice the effort. Women are expected to go to greater lengths to prove themselves to gain the backing of all the key influencers and leaders within the community to build a stronger campaign platform, and importantly to establish their credibility as a candidate contesting for elections.

This also underlines the structural inequalities in Vanuatu's political landscape that make it daunting for women to contest for elections.

Table 3: Data validation reflections, Section 3

	Shefa	Sanma	Malampa	Tafea
Are you surprised by this data?	<i>We are surprised that expectations of women candidates are often double standards compared to male candidates We are surprised that 70% of female respondents were in favour of political parties supporting women candidates – are they voting for women?</i>	<i>Yes, women need the endorsement of the chief and church leaders</i>	<i>The double standards are surprising</i>	No
Is the data reflective of discussions in your community?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes; <i>there are potential women candidates to win but born/ die system is too strong</i>
Are there any points that you think we should add?	<i>Research should be conducted on women candidates' contributions to their communities</i>	<i>We need to motivate men to support women Perhaps we can use concepts from our culture as a bridge to elect women</i>	<i>The nakamal is also a barrier to women; language and church denominations are linked to political parties</i>	<i>Conduct more awareness on gender balance</i>

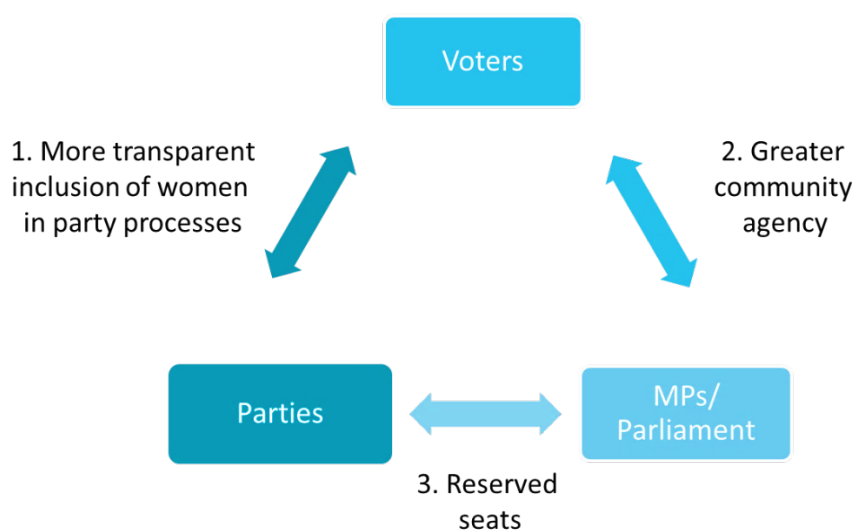
## 5. A renegotiated relationship between voters, political parties & MPs

A second question driving this research was ‘what would inclusive, transformative governance look like in Vanuatu?’ In exploring this question, the research team asked participants whether they thought there was ‘a need to change the way political leaders are elected in Vanuatu’, what would it ‘take for the community to elect a woman candidate’ and the actions they would ‘take to support a woman candidate’.

Overwhelmingly, respondents expressed the view that there was a need to change the current political arrangements in Vanuatu, based on their assessment of the current system’s inability to deliver desired democratic outcomes including quality services and representation. In the words of one participant from Sanma 4, ‘I have voted for a long time, but I don’t see any result from that. But today I’ve seen that I want to see change’.

Given this perceived democratic breakdown, some participants became open to the possibility of women playing a stronger role in Vanuatu’s parliament. Community forums in particular provided an opportunity for research participants to explore strategies for inclusive, transformational change. In these fora, participants often called for renegotiated relationships across the political system between the three key sets of actors: voters, political parties and members of parliament (MPs). More specifically, participants considered three strategies that might see stronger relationships between voters and parties (more transparent inclusion of women in party processes), voters and MPs (greater community agency), as well as between parties and MPs – or parliament more broadly – (reserved seats). These strategies (represented in Figure 13) are explained further below.

Figure 13. Renegotiating relationships between voters, parties and parliament



## 5.1 Improving the relationship between voters and political parties

Over the course of the year in which this research took place, participants often identified political parties as a source of concern for voters. While not all ni-Vanuatu political parties act in the same way, parties – and their agents (campaign managers, subcommittee leaders, MPs) – were seen as institutions that contribute to Vanuatu’s political instability.

It would be good for us to change the system when forming new political parties. Before there used to be just two or three parties, but now when there are more parties, it makes the government unstable (Forum, Malampa 2).

Related to this, voters understood that to have power, MPs needed to be in government.

When you are in power [government] development will come; but when you are in the opposition, development will not come (Forum, Tafea 1).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, because of the community perception that opposition members are unable to deliver for their communities, MPs have been prone to changing their political allegiance, adding further to Vanuatu’s political instability

(Forsyth and Batley 2016, see also Morgan 2008).

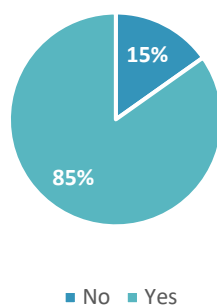
Having identified the need for change in the relationship between voters and political parties, and indeed, social change in Vanuatu more broadly, many research participants suggested that it was time political parties supported women candidates.

I think they should support a woman. Because the instability is the consequence of the male candidates inside parliament. They should change that and support a woman candidate (Interview 2, Tafea 2)

Previously, only men were involved in certain activities, such as kava drinking. Nowadays, it’s everyone. This is showing us that we are changing ... Women need to be more involved in politics. We ni-Vanuatu should be civilised about politics. And you women shouldn’t stand as independents because you will never get through. You need to socialise and be inside a [political] group (Forum, Shefa 1).

100% they should support women to become candidates. In my opinion, women look after everything (Interview 6, Tafea 1).

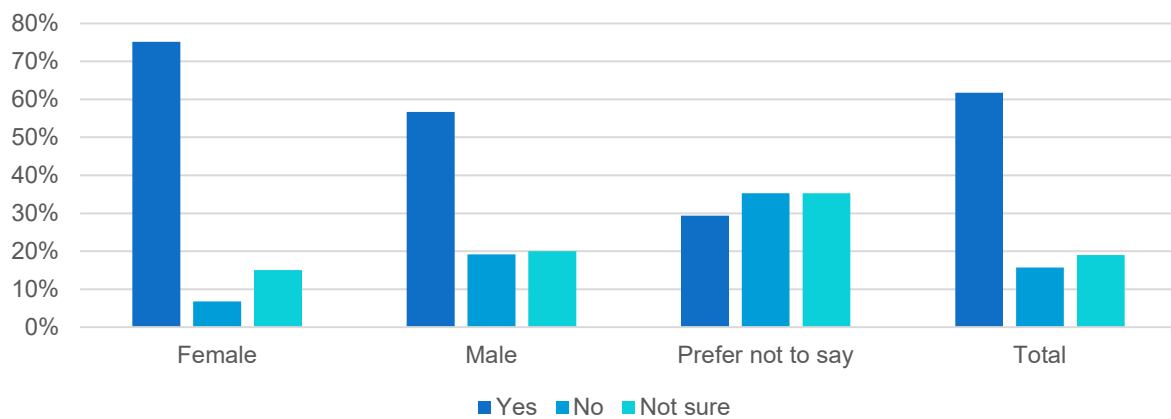
**Figure 14. Do you think political parties should support women?**



While of those interviewed, the level of support was very high (85 per cent in favour, see Figure 14), the questionnaire responses showed a difference of opinion between men and women: over 70 per cent of women surveyed felt that political parties should support women candidates, while the figure for men was just over 50 per cent, and a lower response from those who preferred not to share their gender (see Figure 15).

Source: Interviews (n=79).

Figure 15. Do you think political parties should support women candidates?



Source: Questionnaire (n=395), data disaggregated by gender.

Three strategies were highlighted in the course of the research that might potentially strengthen the relationship between voters and political parties. The first is that voters or **communities could propose specific women to political parties that they would support as their preferred candidate:**

We should target political party leaders in our communities first, break down the barriers between us and just come to a decision to put in a woman candidate (Forum, Malampa 2).

We [in the community] could start cultivating the political mindset [of young people and voters] so that they can see the potential of some of the young women, and we can start to train them. Maybe we can find some way to push them and submit their names to some of the political parties (Interview 6, Sanma 4).

In this way, community leaders were hoping to work with political parties by selecting women that they knew would have the broad support of their community members. These would be women who were well known to the community, and who had proven their commitment to

service provision and development. It would also help political parties in identifying candidates who would already come with a strong support base.

A second strategy to re-energise the relationship between voters and parties was to have **more transparent inclusion of women in the work of political parties.** While one interviewee noted that political parties really needed to help women 'financially' (Interview 6, Malampa 1), more frequently, community members suggested that women be included in political party subcommittees – as members, secretaries, treasurers and chairs. Research participants expressed the importance of parties shaping the political experience of women more broadly:

They should get women to be chair, or secretaries, of the subcommittees inside the constituencies. The only role that a woman plays in a political party is the secretary, because men hate to write and take minutes and all this. So [to date] that is the only role they give to women (Interview 1, Shefa 1).

We should involve women in political parties and subcommittees. Enable them to



hold positions like secretaries or treasurer. From there, we'll raise them up (Interview 5, Malampa 2).

I think they should accept any woman's request to affiliate with a political party (Interview 4, Sanma 2).

Yes, I really want the political parties to support the women ... Because then they could educate and equip her politically, so she can start that political journey with the party, and possibly contest for the elections. Preferably, she should engage with the major political parties, such as UMP or Vanua'aku Pati because they have more supporters, hence, the chances of winning and becoming leaders is high (Interview 2, Shefa 1).

Previously, the woman MP worked inside a party (Forum, Sanma 3).

In Sanma 4, the need to have more women within party structures was linked to their potential ability to endorse the candidacy of other women:

If we had a female advocate in those parties, maybe we could have a chance for the women to get through. But most of the political parties are mostly male dominated. For me, personally, this is one of the challenges or obstacles, for the women's name to be endorsed through the congress. There is nobody to support their names being endorsed (Interview 6, Sanma 4).

A third strategy that was identified in the research concerned **the role of campaign managers in championing women's political candidacy**. While in Sanma 4, it was noted that the campaign manager should

be a man, in Shefa 2, there were calls for more women campaign managers.

For the women to contest, that's fine, but during the political campaign, there should be strong male advocates to campaign for them. Because what he said is very true. For women to tackle the male issues is very difficult. We have some very good women who are outspoken, very good women leaders, but when it comes to politics, I think it's good for the men advocates to run the political campaign for them (Interview 6, Sanma 4).

They should allow women to run their campaigns. So, if they found a woman to contest, these political parties should run their elections. And their supporters should follow, in order for the system to work (Interview 5, Shefa 2).

In the end, this speaks to the diversity across Vanuatu and the need to tailor this approach to what will best suit the particular dynamics of each community.

## 5.2 Improving the relationship between voters and MPs/parliament

As with political parties, the voters who participated in this research expressed concerns with individual MPs and the current state of parliament. (It is worth noting that the research preceded a national referendum in May 2024 on the constitutional status of an elected MP following resignation or termination from a political party so as to prevent floor crossing.) In many instances, it was the disappointment with individual behaviours that underpinned this concern and frustration.

I think it is time to change because the parliament system is not working; people crossing the floor, motions of no confidence, it's dirty, it's telling us that we need to change (Forum, Sanma 3).

We are wasting the country's money every time we change the government. I don't think it is the white men; it is the businessmen who are affecting the change and causing the instability (Forum, Tafea 1).

There isn't a problem with the system; it's only a pathway. It is the man who walks on this pathway, deciding to take a short-cut that is not right (Forum, Tafea 1).

Women voters in the constituency held by the only woman currently elected in Vanuatu shared their views on the opportunity to vote for a woman. They noted that they felt they could trust her, relate to her, and explain their issues:

I choose a candidate because I am confident in myself and [because] I trust the candidate I choose to be my MP for tomorrow. I know that she is going to take my concerns seriously. Anything I want to tell her, it's easy. I can come to her. I can ask her safely. It is easier when I can talk to her. For men, it's harder. I have to go here, here, here ... long steps. For women, you can always speak to her. She can come to the *mamas* and ask. MP men, no (Interview 6, Shefa 2).

We should support women, because those [men] who have [previously] gone into parliament do not follow what the people want. But women are humble, they know what is needed in the

household, and they have the power to do everything. So, the community should support it (Interview 7, Shefa 2).

Across all the provinces visited, voters consistently suggested that they wanted a stronger relationship with their MP. In establishing these new relationships, including with future women representatives, it was often suggested that the community needed to work more collectively:

There must be more unity in the community. It's not about a woman voting for a woman; it's a community decision (Forum, Sanma 2).

Community provided support would be better (Forum, Sanma 1).

We should be talking about how we can put a woman into parliament. They have gone to school; they have gained masters degrees and they hold good jobs. If the men are being strongheaded, why don't we try them [women]? (Forum, Tafea 1).

I want to say thank you for men's concerns. There are some things that are wrong about us women – wearing trousers, drinking kava. But if we do good work, we have value, and God will raise us. We must change our mentality, unite to put women candidates (Forum, Sanma 3).

While communities often expressed a desire for greater agency in the decision making process, some participants had more specific ideas. One was that chiefs and community leaders took the initiative to give women more leadership roles so that they had the opportunity to

demonstrate their ability to represent others.

This present chief here has worked a lot with us women, and we are part of his team in the community. He uses the women a lot, and we contribute in the decision making. The chief calls a meeting, asked for opinions, and so we women, we presented our ideas, our thoughts in the meeting as well (Interview 4, Sanma 2).

Community leaders could also conduct more community awareness on women's leadership. In Sanma 3, there was a suggestion that the community reconsider its own internal governance arrangements:

We need to restructure community networks – children, youth, women

– then we may get enough support for women (Forum, Sanma 3).

Conversely in Malampa, one participant referred to existing governance arrangements and suggested that the community use these to endorse a woman candidate, potentially starting from provincial elections rather than national elections:

There has to be an agreement in our area. The *nasara* or *nakamal* has to give their validation, the council endorses, then we need to send [it] to Vila for approval. I think it is easy if the woman comes with money and the women need to support that idea so that the *papas* can trust them. Maybe test it in the provincial elections (Forum, Malampa 1).



Cultural exchange between Epeli Tinivata (BOP) and a community chief  
Image credit: Balance of Power

### 5.3 Improving the relationship between political parties and parliament

There was an interesting diversity of opinion among research participants when considering a renegotiated relationship between political parties and parliament. Some of this is based in the tension – explored earlier in this report – between traditional and democratic forms of governance. Some participants continued to suggest that the problem was the ‘white man system’ imposed in western democratic institutions such as the parliament. Yet, even in the most conservative communities, support for women’s inclusion in those democratic institutions was evident:

If we follow our governing system for the *nakamal*, it will never happen. But if we follow the government system of politics, it can happen. *Kastom* is different; politics is different. If the men understand this, then we can put a woman into parliament (Forum, Tafea 2).

This is changing, because previously *kastom* was strong. This time, women are pushing their way in (Forum, Sanma 2).

Changing the electoral system so that there are seats reserved for women to contest has been a strategy used around the world, but also in the municipal councils of Port Vila and Luganville since 2014 (Rousseau and Kenneth 2018). When participants were asked whether they supported reserved seats as a way of renegotiating the relationship between political parties and parliament, there were also mixed responses from participants of the community forums and interviewees. Of those interviewed, 79 per cent said they supported reserved seats once these were

explained. Most interviews, however, followed this line of discussion:

Interviewer: Would you support reserved seats for women in parliament?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Why?

Respondent: Can you explain these reserved seats?

Interviewer: Reserved seats is when you have 52 seats in parliament, but we reserve several seats for women. Do you support that?

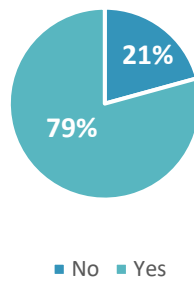
Respondent: Yes, to be fair. To have ideas from women (Interview 1, Sanma 1).

Support for reserved seats varied between communities (see Figure 17), with the greatest reported support in Shefa 2, Samna 3, Sanma 1 and Malampa 2 – some of the more urban communities visited in the course of this research.

I think we can start off with reserved seats. We can encourage reserved seats, but [once] people have a clear idea on gender equality then we’ll remove the reserved seats [and encourage women to run on] an open seat (Interview 5, Malampa 2).

Malampa 1 and Tafea 1, by contrast, as some of the most remote communities, were not quite as convinced by the introduction of reserved seats. In Tafea 2, one interviewee suggested ‘it is better for [women] to share their thoughts with these men, and they’ll take it up to parliament’ (Interview 8, Tafea 1). For this person, reserved seats were therefore seen as an unnecessary mechanism to support women’s political representation.

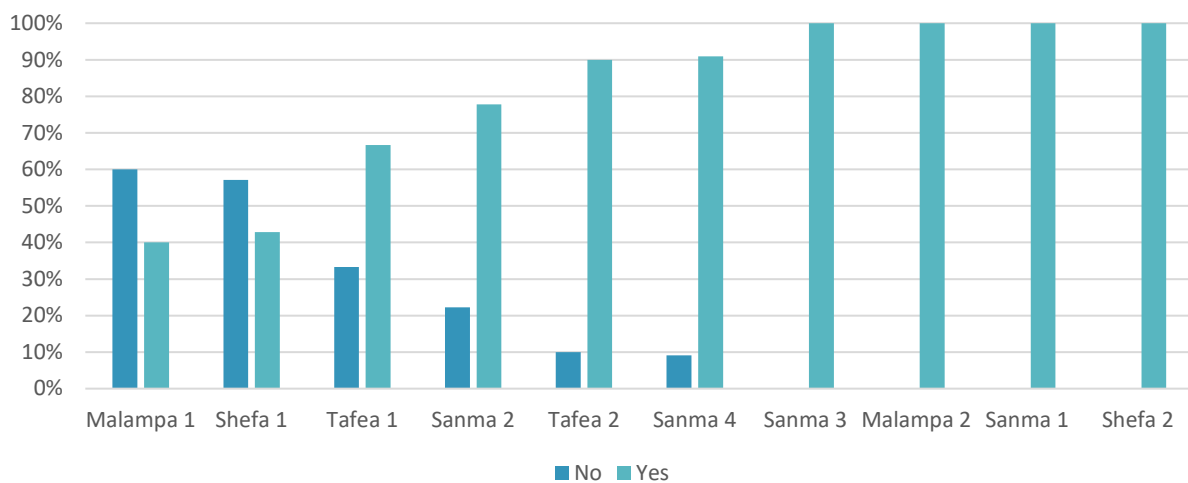
Figure 16. Do you support reserved seats?



The contradictory finding here is that participants in Shefa 1 – an urban, but mixed, settlement – were also less convinced of the merits of reserved seats, with almost 60 per cent of interviewees opposed. As one interviewee from this community explained, ‘I don’t want women to be told off in parliament that they came in because of reserved seats, not because of the way everybody else came in’ (Interview 1, Shefa 1).

Source: Interviews (n=82).

Figure 17. Do you support reserved seats?



Source: Interviews (n=82), disaggregated by community.

For two interviewees at least, however, reserved seats were seen as vital in circuit breaking the current barriers to women’s political leadership in Vanuatu. It is noteworthy that both of these interviewees lived in remote communities.

Reserved seats will be the only solution for the women for the short term, because if they run [without reserved seats], they will never get in. But if they are given these reserved seats they will have the opportunity and that’s where they will build their confidence in

the political arena and then they might stand and the political parties will see them and say ‘we want you to affiliate with our party’, so next time we will put you further up. So slowly, that will come. It will be a step-by-step process (Interview 6, Sanma 2).

Reserved seats entails just 3 seats for women. Make it balanced, make it 50/50. Giving just three to women, that’s not balanced (Interview 1, Malampa 1).

Table 4: Data validation reflections, Section 4

	Shefa	Sanma	Malampa	Tafea
Are you surprised by this data?	<i>We have been hearing stories, but this is the first time we have seen collective information from other provinces</i>	Yes	Yes; <i>I know our kastom in Malampa is being broken down, but I am surprised it is happening in other provinces too</i>	Yes
Is the data reflective of discussions in your community?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are there any points that you think we should add?	<i>This research should be done in all six provinces of Vanuatu</i>	<i>Reserved seats should start in provincial/municipal elections first before the national elections; political party constitutions must be inclusive</i>	<i>A woman can campaign for a woman candidate too, but it does need the support of men</i>	<i>Conduct more awareness workshops on inclusive governance at the community level</i>

## 6. Greater balance between men and women in decision making

Finally, this research prompted participants' thinking about the social norms that define roles and responsibilities of men and women in ni-Vanuatu society, and the related norms of leadership. In many community forums, participants were greeted by a research team wearing black t-shirts with the Balance of Power logo. Not surprisingly, the 'imbalance' in power between men and women, particularly in communities, was often remarked on:

There is no balance at all, but maybe you guys coming, you will bring the balance back, like what's written on your shirt (Forum, Malampa 1).

Acknowledging this power imbalance, participants in different communities suggested that this needed to be addressed; as one participant from Sanma 4 noted, 'a bird must fly with two wings'. Perhaps more significantly, this theme was also heard in Tafea, a province known for its highly traditional gender norms:

Who is balancing home and power? In every place, women have always been the ones balancing the power. We the people of Tanna should be changing the way we think now. If we are thinking of creating balance, we should start with the power at hand. God did not create Eve without a purpose (Forum, Tafea 1).

Yes, because the reality in Vanuatu is that women take up [lead in] most services [rather] than men (Interview 4, Tafea 1).

A number of women were clear that the most effective way to recalibrate balance between men and women was to work with men, rather than continuing programs that only target and work with women.

I think it's important for men to see the importance of you supporting women. For people to know that there should be a balance of power in the provincial government. This won't be the last. I would like you to get more trainings here to educate men especially.

[Interviewer: So the challenge is not with the women, it's with the men?]

Yes, it's with the men. If they can ... understand equal rights and know that women have the right to participate in decision making in the provincial government and national government, I think that would be good for the people in this community. Because they are talking about *kastom*, but now, the present chief is getting the women to assist in the *nakamal*, and the church, where they are using us to preach, and we run [church] crusades here. So I don't think there is any problem if you come here to give training to men, get them to understand more, there won't be any problem (Interview 4, Sanma 2).

In one of the communities visited in Sanma province, the research heard about developments within the Anglican Church which had been working towards enshrining the principle of gender equality in its constitution; it was proposed, for example, that delegations would need to be gender balanced. For this pastor, these high-level discussions were seen as an important mandate to support women's increased leadership within his own community; he was keen to ensure women would hold various leadership positions in his church.

Encouraging discussion among ni-Vanuatu on the balance between men and women in leadership positions is a core programmatic goal of Balance of Power. In this sense, the community forums served a dual purpose: first, understanding the current motivations of ni-Vanuatu voters, but second, provoking deep reflection about what might bring greater balance in political decision making. In the only community that had elected a woman to the national parliament, the need for this balance was clearly appreciated:

We need women inside our parliament in order to maintain that balance inside the government system. Because both sides have an opinion, just as it is inside a home. I think we should support these women because they too have great visions (Interview 1, Shefa 2).

When I heard about the snap election, I was happy because I was determined to find a leader that could help us in our future. I have heard that the community has discussed and decided upon a candidate, a woman candidate. Personally, I have always wanted to vote for a female candidate, it is my dream to have a woman candidate. So, when the community decided upon a woman candidate, I agreed 100 per cent. I did not rely on someone else to tell me who to vote, no. It is my prayer and dream to have a woman candidate (Interview 2, Shefa 2).

More broadly, many participants in this research distinguished more traditional social norms based in *kastom* from those norms that continue to evolve in a modern society and what that means for women's political leadership in Vanuatu. As one participant expressed it:

*Kastom*, we have broken that down. It is time for change. I have worked with politicians, but they put women down. If a woman can be a pilot, why can't we have a woman in parliament? Those of us who put women down, we need to change now. Women manage households. We must stop putting women down (Forum, Sanma 3).



## 7. Conclusion

This research was interested in exploring the motivations of ni-Vanuatu voters at election time, and their ideas to improve governance in the country. As we summarise in Figure 18 below, we found that many of the rules that govern voters' decisions are often unspoken. In fact, the research process itself presented our

participants a unique opportunity to articulate publicly the rules they use to navigate their decision to vote. It was also clear that these unspoken rules are not always agreeable to, or endorsed by, everyone in the community. Tensions are evident in the way individuals and communities navigate these unspoken rules.

Figure 18. Unspoken, unwritten and written rules of politics

	Decision making	MP expectations	Assessments of women candidates
Unspoken and unwritten rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community leaders can influence the community's vote choices</li> <li>• Political party leaders can influence community leaders' vote choices</li> <li>• Husbands and close male relatives can influence women's vote choices</li> <li>• Communities can know how individuals vote</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voters can expect transactional benefits from their vote</li> <li>• Voters can expect their MP to consult the community regularly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women should have a university degree (in politics) if they wish to contest an election</li> <li>• Women candidates should have women voters' support even though men can influence women's vote choices</li> </ul>
Written rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Constitution stipulates that the electoral franchise is 'universal, equal and secret' (chapter 1, article 4, paragraph 2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Constitution prohibits a leader from entering into activities that unduly benefit them (article 66)</li> <li>• The Representation of the People Act (2019) prohibits a candidate from intending to 'corruptly influence' a voter (section 61B)</li> <li>• Parliament (Members' Expenses and Allowances) Act 2017 (as amended) provides MPs with funding to travel to their constituencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Constitution gives women the right to stand for election (article 17)</li> </ul>



Finally, our research found that there are unspoken rules for women aspiring to contest an elections: they should be well versed in politics, preferably with a university degree in the subject; and they should garner their principal support from women voters even when women voters are not always in a position to make their own electoral choice. Again, these unspoken rules run counter to the written constitutional provision that all women – regardless of education, financial position, age – have the right to stand for election.

This report has uncovered that change towards a more inclusive, transformative

form of governance in Vanuatu would require greater transparency in the rules and processes of political participation, and accountability of MPs. To achieve this, there is a need for voter education and awareness that goes far beyond existing modules on the secrecy of the vote and the correct way to fill in a paper ballot. Programs that engage communities on their relationships with political parties and politicians, including the power they have to hold their elected representatives accountable, should be locally designed and implemented in Vanuatu.

## 8. Methodology

The methodology of this research project is grounded in principles of partnership, adaptation and ethical research practice which align with both Pacific and inclusive research methodologies. Pacific research methodologies privilege relationship building and cultural contexts (see Ponton 2018, Smith 2021), while inclusive research methodologies explicitly acknowledge and aim to minimise power dynamics among researchers, the researched and topic of research itself (see Naepi 2019, Nind 2014, and Palmieri and MacLean 2022).

In this section, we outline the research approach of the project, the way in which communities were chosen to participate (sample), the ways in which those participants were engaged (data collection methods), and in the spirit of constructive research, the mechanism by which the data was validated by a selection of those participants.

### 8.1 Research in partnership

This research project began in early 2023 as an activity under the Australian government funded program, Balance of Power (BOP), initiated in 2019. A foundational implementation strategy of the program, since inception, has been research. Indeed, to date BOP research has covered voter perceptions of women's leadership in Tonga; perceptions of women's leadership among tertiary students at the University of the South Pacific; the role of women as community health workers in Fiji; and the social and cultural impacts of seasonal work in communities in Fiji. While always interested in undertaking a research project, the BOP Vanuatu country office had chosen to focus first on activities that promoted women's leadership such as social media campaigns, film productions, photo exhibitions and profiling women leaders. In 2023, however, the Vanuatu BOP program decided that the time was right to design and implement a new research project on voter motivations.



*Mereani Rokotuibau (BOP Executive Director) and Seman Dalesa Saraken (DWA Governance and Leadership Program Coordinator)*  
*Image credit: Balance of Power*

In line with its documented ways of working, BOP sought strategic partnerships with key institutions in Vanuatu to undertake the research. The first partner identified was the Vanuatu Department of Women's Affairs (DWA) which had expressed its own interest in pursuing more research into political parties. A second partner was found in the Vanuatu Department of Youth and Sports Development which was interested in the voting motivations of young people and was keen to see its network of youth officers across the country involved in the research. A formal partnership was also established with the Australian National University (ANU) where the program's short term research adviser was based.

## 8.2 Research team

These partnerships structured the composition of the research team. Led by the BOP Vanuatu country manager (Wilson Toa), the core team included the program's Fiji-based (and Fiji-national) research coordinator (Vani Nailumu), the Vanuatu program officer (Telstar Jimmy), DWA's governance and leadership program coordinator (Seman Saraken-Dalesa), and the team's research adviser (Sonia Palmieri). The team was eventually joined by a research intern (Alira Tevi). The project was overseen by the program's Vanuatu-based Executive Director (Jennifer Kalpokas Doan). This was a research team that had not worked together on a research project before, and which had varying levels of experience in 'formal research'. The diverse skills brought by each team member, however, were all extremely important to the execution of this project. In particular,

the ni-Vanuatu team members from both BOP and DWA brought in-depth understanding of how best to navigate the political economies of each of the research sites. Depending on the specific location, they worked with provincial and local government administrators and representatives, youth networks, church networks, and partners in closely related donor programs to socialise the purpose of the research and ensure participants attended community forums. The Fiji based research coordinator brought her contextual knowledge of other BOP research projects, including Pacific research methodologies. The research adviser was able to support the team with the technical aspects of research, based on her previous experience of supporting localised research projects, but also shepherded the project through her university's human ethics procedures, eventually attaining research protocol 2023/088 through the ANU.

The core team travelled together to each of the research sites, except for Tafea province where the BOP monitoring and evaluation coordinator (Epeli Tinivata) attended in the place of the research adviser who was unable to attend. In addition, BOP's Fiji-based Executive Director (Mereani Rokotuibau) travelled with the team to Malampa province. As a project involving a significant amount of internal travel across Vanuatu, the research team benefited from multiple opportunities to discuss and consider the research process and what they were hearing from research participants. Shared meals at breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as opportunities to share down time on various excursions were useful in building camaraderie and trust, particularly in light of diverse skill sets and the related sense of trepidation among some in the team in conducting the research.

### 8.3 Research approach

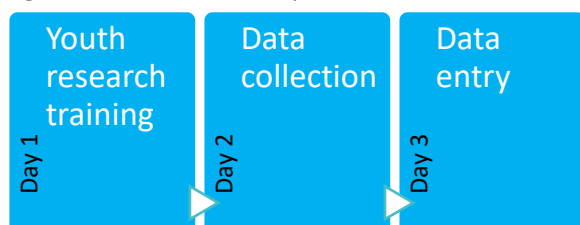
The research approach used in this project aligns with BOP's research strategy and vision in prioritising the exploration of social norms within different Pacific contexts. In particular, the approach emphasised empowering local stakeholders to determine research priorities, building a cohort of local researchers, and importantly empowering and strengthening the research skills of local researchers. This approach was weaved into the research design and methods, to help ensure the relevance, ownership, and applicability of the findings to the communities involved.

The research was preceded by a scoping visit to Port Vila in February 2023. The team met with representatives of the Department of Women's Affairs, the Department of Youth and Sports Development, the Shefa Provincial Administration, the Vanuatu Electoral Office and the United Nations Development Programme's Vanuatu Electoral Education Program.

Once ethics had been secured through both the ANU and BOP's own internal process, data collection began in March 2023. The team spent three days in each community, usually following the same pattern (see Figure 18). On the first day, the research adviser and the research coordinator worked together to train young people in research. While in Shefa province, the team realised that these conversations needed to be prefaced with a broader discussion of the purpose of the research and an introduction to the work of BOP. On the second day in the community, data was collected by first disseminating a questionnaire with just over 20 questions. This was followed by a facilitated community forum, after which young people who had attended the training on the first day interviewed various members

of the community. On the final day in the community, the research team worked together to enter as much data as possible and ensuring secure data storage before either moving on to the next community or returning home.

**Figure 20. Research in practice**



### 8.4 Research sample

This research sought to engage with a range of ‘unusual suspects’ – or previously under-researched groups – namely voters in both urban and rural settings. As noted above, the research team worked with area administrators, chiefs and pastors and provincial youth officers to encourage diversity among the research participants.

Originally, it was envisaged that the research team would visit three communities in three different provinces (for a total of nine communities), selected on the following criteria:

1. At least one community in each province had the opportunity to vote for a woman candidate;
2. The research team had a strong grasp of the political economy in the community;
3. The research team would be able to establish a working relationship with the Area Administrator and approval has been sought from the Provincial

Government’s Secretary General and/or Assistant Secretary General;

4. There would be an opportunity to test differences between urban and rural communities.

On the basis of this criteria, three provinces were identified: Shefa, Sanma, and Malampa, with communities in each of these provinces to be determined in consultation with the respective Provincial Government, the Department of Women’s Affairs, and the Department of Youth and Sports Development.

A fourth province, Tafea, was added in March 2023 because of geographic location (the southern most part of the country) and because of known conservative views about women’s political participation and representation among its inhabitants. Two women had previously contested in Tanna – one of whom BOP had featured in an article highlighting her experience in contesting and what she had to go through to seek endorsement from chiefs and other community leaders. Importantly, Tafea holds a particular place in the political makeup of the country, with over 11 per cent of MPs originating from the province, and two prime ministers in the last ten years.

To facilitate the inclusion of Tafea in this research, two communities were visited per province rather than the originally envisaged three. As evident in Table 5, four community forums were held in Sanma, although the first was conducted as a pilot.

Table 5. Data collection sites (2023)

Province	Village	Urban/Rural	Dates
SANMA	Sanma 1	Urban	23-Apr-23
	Sanma 2	Rural	24 – 25 April 2023
	Sanma 3	Rural	27 – 28 April 2023 and 30 April 2023
	Sanma 4	Rural	2 – 3 May 2023
SHEFA	Shefa 1	Urban	3 – 4 June 2023
	Shefa 2	Rural	7 – 8 June 2023
MALAMPA	Malampa 1	Rural	21 – 22 August 2023
	Malampa 2	Rural	23 – 24 August 2023
TAFEA	Tafea 1	Rural	6 – 7 November 2023
	Tafea 2	Rural	8 – 9 November 2023

### 8.5 Data collection methods

Data was collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods: a questionnaire, community forums and semi-structured interviews. These methods complemented each other and ensured there was a richness and diversity in the data set across each community, and across the four provinces. The mixed method approach also mitigated, to some extent, the perception of confirmation bias whereby participants may respond to questions on the basis of what they think they should say rather than what they actually think. Questions were asked in multiple formats, which enabled a reasonably robust triangulation of data.

In total, 397 individuals participated in this research – all of whom participated in the questionnaire and community forums – and 85 of whom were also interviewed.

Figure 21. Respondents by age

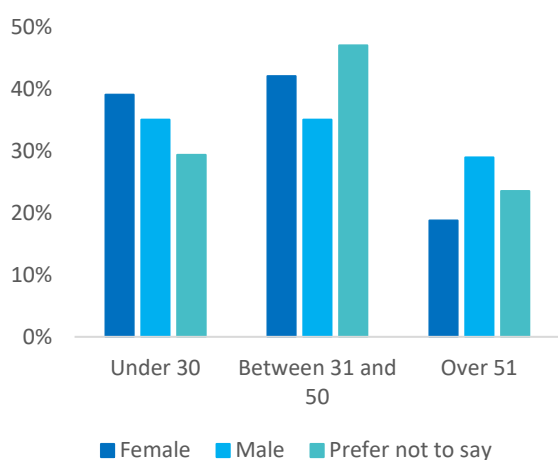
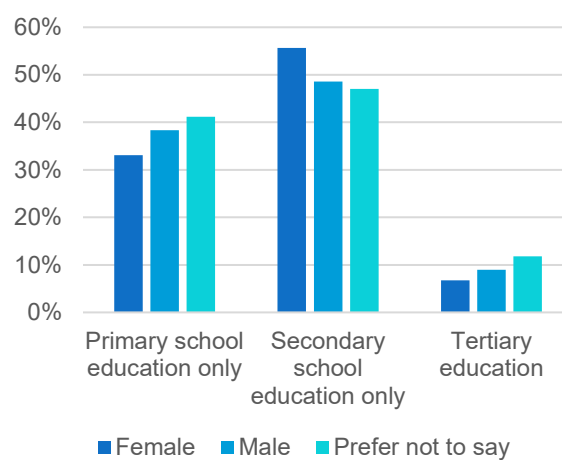


Figure 22. Respondents by education



Source: Questionnaire (n=397)



**Questionnaire of voters:** To provide some consistency of data across all of the communities researched in this project, a short, standardised questionnaire was distributed to all voters attending the community forums. The purpose of the questionnaire was to capture voters' recollection of the previous election (November 2022), specifically their memories of the campaign and interest in the election, when they decided to vote, if and how candidates and parties reached out to them personally, and their most trusted sources of advice at election time. Where participants required some support in filling out the questionnaire, a youth representative or member of the research team was on hand to assist. These youth representatives had been trained earlier in the importance of consent, confidentiality and privacy when supporting community members in answering their questionnaires. The questionnaire replicated or adapted questions (asterisked below) used in similar research tools such as the Pacific Attitudes Survey (Mudaliar et al 2024) and the Australian Election Study (Cameron et al 2022) for comparative purposes. The questions were translated into Bislama and distributed in hard copy but entered into Google Forms in English (according to question number) by members of the research team.

#### Questions asked

1. Are you: male; female; prefer not to say?
2. Are you: below 30; between 31-50; over 51?
3. Have you completed: primary school education only; secondary school education only; tertiary education?
4. \*Thinking about the snap general election in November 2022, how much interest did you have in the election itself? A lot; Some; None at all.
5. \*Thinking about the snap general election in November 2022, how much attention did you pay to the campaign? A lot; Some; None at all.
6. \*Did a candidate or someone from a political party try to persuade you to vote for them during the campaign? Yes; No.
7. \*If yes, did the candidate or the person from a political party persuade you ...: In a conversation face to face? In a conversation over the phone or via text message? In a discussion on the internet (e.g. by Facebook)? Other?
8. \*When did you decide how you would vote in the election? 12 months before; 6 months before; 2 weeks before; The night before; I did not vote in the election.
9. Were any of the following important in determining your vote (tick only two)? Financial support from the candidate for school fees; Financial support from the candidate for a bag of rice/food; Financial support from the candidate for housing materials; Financial support from the candidate for a community project; Financial support from the candidate towards a new road in your community; I did not vote in the election.
10. What do you look for in a Member of Parliament (tick only two)? Ability of candidate to represent you and the community in parliament; Ability of candidate to develop new laws; Ability of candidate to manage the national budget; Ability of candidate to introduce anti-corruption reform; I am not sure/I did not think about this.
11. Are you still happy with your candidate decision in the snap election (November 2022)? Extremely happy; A little bit happy; Not very happy; Extremely unhappy; I did not vote.

12. \*What information do you use to decide who to vote for? Discussions at home; Conversations in the village; Church sermons; Facebook posts and discussions; Newspaper articles; Other; I did not vote in this election.

13. \*When you are deciding who to vote for, whose advice do you value the most (tick only three)? Church leaders; Community leaders; Chief leaders; Political party leaders; Business leaders; Parents; Husband/wife; Other immediate family (brothers/sisters); Other extended family (uncle/aunt); Friends and colleagues from work; Media (newspaper, radio); Friends on Facebook and from the Internet; Other

14. \*When you are deciding who to vote for, how much do you trust the advice [of each of these people/groups/sources of information]?

15. \*Do you think political parties should support women candidates? Yes; No; Not sure.

16. If a woman ran in your constituency, would you vote for her? Yes; No; Not sure.

**Community forums:** These served as a primary form of data collection to explore particular themes in depth. The forums were designed as a form of civic engagement and aimed to foster open dialogue on key themes pertaining to governance in Vanuatu, and voters' decision making and engagement in elections. The community forums allowed participants to reflect, share their perspectives and ideas, engage in constructive dialogue openly. The community forums utilised an adaptive leadership approach (see ICF n.d.), which played an instrumental role in enhancing and encouraging the active participation of community members in the forum. The adaptive leadership approach helped in questioning and identifying varying

community dynamics and challenges, which created an environment for robust and meaningful discussions. Community forums were facilitated by team members from BOP and DWA in Bislama. Notes were taken on butcher's paper during the forums by a team member Bislama, and then translated into English by two members of the team. Community forums elicited views on each community's norms around voting, voters' satisfaction with the outcome of elections, and whether women can and do vote for women candidates.

I'm very happy that it's an open forum, everybody's answers to all the questions are respected. The forum gave space for both men and women to speak up. And also the way we respect someone's answer, not coming out directly in front of everybody, but allowing them time to talk to you later on. Because in the survey, for example, I answered a question in front of everybody that is very important, and I'm very happy that this forum allowed for that space. We give them space to raise questions and answers and frustrations privately, not in front of everyone (Interview 1, Shefa 1).

#### Questions asked

1. What did you think about the questions in the questionnaire? Which questions were most interesting and why?
2. Why do people in this community vote at election time?
3. What do you think are some of the key rules around voting in your community? Does everyone have the same understanding/interpretation of these rules?
4. What do you think community members hoped for when they voted for their elected representative?

5. How do community members now feel about the result of the election now, six months later?

6. What do you think is an elected candidate's responsibility?

7. Is there a need to change the way political leaders are elected in Vanuatu?

8. *[If relevant]* In your community [name of women candidate] ran for election. Why do you think she was not successful, or why was she successful?

9. Why do people say 'women do not support women candidates'?

10. *[Only where a woman has not been elected]* What do you think it would take for your community to elect a woman candidate? What actions would you take to support a woman candidate in your community?



*Telstar Jimmy and a Women's Community Representative*  
Image credit: Balance of Power

**Interviews with voters:** The one-on-one interview process ensured a more personalised and in-depth exploration and reflection of participants' attitudes and behaviours towards voting, their perceptions of campaign dynamics, and importantly provided a degree of confidentiality for participants when reflecting on the secrecy (or otherwise) of their vote. These interviews were conducted by youth representatives from each community as well as research team members.

### Questions asked

1. Are there any views expressed in the community forum that you particularly agree with?

2. Are there any views expressed in the community forum that you particularly disagree with?

3. Thinking back to the snap general election in November 2022, would you say you voted according to your own personal preference? If yes, what makes you say that? If not, why not? Prompts:

- Community leaders told me how to vote.
- My husband / wife told me how to vote.
- Chiefs told me how to vote.
- Other immediate family (brothers / sisters) told me how to vote.
- Businesspeople told me how to vote.
- Other extended family (uncle / aunt) told me how to vote.
- Church leaders told me how to vote.
- My parents told me how to vote.
- I promised my vote to a candidate before I knew all the candidates well enough to decide.
- Other reason ...

4. Thinking back to the snap general election in November 2022, do you think that your vote was cast in secret? If yes, what makes you say that? If not, why not? Prompts:

- It's a small community and everyone knows how everyone votes
- I gave a candidate/campaign manager my voter ID card and they voted for me
- I told people who I voted for

5. Have you ever experienced any difficulties after voting for a candidate that you know others didn't approve of? Can you tell me what happened?

6. Why is it hard to vote for a woman in Vanuatu?

7. Do you think political parties should support women candidates? How should they do that?

8. Would you support reserved seats for women in parliament? Why or why not?

## 8.6 Data validation

Reporting back and validating the research findings to the communities or participants involved not only helps accuracy but reliability of the research data and findings. This is an integral ethical process given that the study deploys an approach founded on Pacific values. For this reason, the research team was committed to ensuring that the research was presented back to the communities involved for their validation.

A second key objective in the data validation process was to foster ownership of the research learnings amongst local stakeholders that facilitated the research. Validating the research data helps in strengthening the relationship and credibility of the research with local government stakeholders, and importantly is a strategic mechanism to ensure buy-in from policy influencers and powerholders to drive research learnings and outcomes that might ultimately shift policies and practices that would bring meaningful and transformational change.

In designing the workshop, BOP and DWA staff came together to discuss how to approach the day. Individuals from across the provinces in which the research was carried out were identified to participate in the workshop. On 22 August 2024, five participants from Shefa province were joined by four participants from Tanna, five from Santo and one from Malampa. This group included a women's representative and a youth representative from local administrative areas, local area administrators, chiefs, pastors and a manager of a local skills centre who had been instrumental in supporting one of the community forums. The group was carefully selected on the basis that each person would help to socialise the findings in their respective communities. In addition, the data validation workshop

aimed to ensure that all the priorities and perspectives of local stakeholders, and importantly the research participants, were meaningfully reflected. Individuals from the Vanuatu Bureau of Statistics, the Department of Women's Affairs, and the United Nations Development Program's Vanuatu Electoral Environment Program were invited to observe.

The validation workshop was run by members of the research team from BOP and the Department of Women's Affairs. The day began with an introduction to the research project, including a description of the research process (described above). This was followed by a presentation of the key research findings. Participants were asked to engage in an interactive 'World Café style' discussion; each table – comprised of participants grouped by province – spent half an hour considering each of the three sections of the report, interrogating the data, raising queries and additional insights. For each section, participants were asked 'are you surprised by this data?', 'is there anything in this data that you think does not reflect the discussions in your community?', and 'are there any points that you think we should add?'. Each table was given the opportunity to report back on their consideration of these questions. A final question and answer session was facilitated after all these oral reports, and the day concluded with closing remarks from BOP's executive director. The workshop enabled participants to present, learn, discuss and dissect and give further contextual insights on the research data and findings, and to also give reflections on each section of the research report. These are captured in the report as tables 1 to 4.



*Data validation workshop, Port Vila, August 2024  
Image credit: Balance of Power*

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