

The 2020 Vanuatu Elections: How Did Women Fare?

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In the Vanuatu national elections held on 19 March 2020, voters elected their third consecutive all-male parliament. Across 10 of Vanuatu's 18 constituencies, only 18 women contested the elections and were significantly outnumbered, representing only six per cent of all candidates.¹ Women have been absent from national parliament since 2012, and only five women have held a position in parliament since independence.

Reserved seats have been secured for women at the local level in Port Vila and Luganville municipal councils yet continue to be controversial for national level government. While the debate is likely to be revisited in this post-election period, any reform efforts must be locally driven (see Rousseau and Kenneth-Watson 2018). Programs are also in place to build greater acceptance of women's leadership and to challenge the social norms that inhibit women from standing for election. Beyond these factors, Vanuatu's single non-transferable voting system (SNTV), which has led to a significant proliferation of political parties and fragmented politics, is also highly relevant to the issue of women's political representation. Furthermore, the lack of political party backing for women has been recognised as a major problem for quite some time, and continued to be an issue in the 2020 elections. This In Brief provides a preliminary analysis and raises some questions for further research.

The SNTV system and women's campaigning

The SNTV system was introduced in Vanuatu for the 1975 elections. Aside from the benefits afforded by their simplicity, SNTV systems are purported to enable minority groups to gain representation in parliament (Van Trease 2005). A disadvantage, however, is their likelihood to effect significant political party fragmentation (Morgan 2008). In the 2020 elections, approximately one in five candidates ran as independents, while the remaining candidates were backed by 47 political parties. The 52 successful candidates represent 18 political parties, and no independents were elected. As with previous parliaments, the 2020 parliament is fractured and the prime minister, Bob Loughman from the Vanua'aku Pati, was voted into the position

through coalition bargaining rather than securing a majority of seats. Results from these and past elections demonstrate that while the SNTV system has encouraged a range of political parties to contest the elections, it has not succeeded in bringing about diversity or balanced gender representation in the parliament.

Profile, reputation and resources are critical to success in the Vanuatu electoral context. Where literacy is limited, voter choice can come down to recognising a face on a voting card. Politicians backed by strong financial resources can bring in rice, solar panels and other benefits to sway voter decisions.² With such a large number of political parties and candidates, campaigning through policy differentiation is minimal and a big personality and reputation, reciprocity, obligation and religious affiliations are important foundations to success (Van Trease 2005). Furthermore, in rural constituencies, campaigning requires significant financial backing to reach out and be known by a dispersed electorate.

Well-established political parties can provide such backing for candidates, but newer parties or independents can struggle to secure the sponsorship required for campaigning. Mary Jack Kaviamu contested in the multi-member electorate of Tanna in both the 2016 and 2020 elections. In 2020 Kaviamu secured 299 votes, which was well short of the roughly 1300 votes needed to gain a seat in this constituency. Reflecting on [her experiences](#) post the 2016 elections, Kaviamu highlighted the difficulties of running as an independent in a rural electorate where transport costs are high and the population is spread over 500 square kilometres. In theory, the SNTV system could overcome these challenges for women in rural areas if they captured a concentrated vote share rather than harnessing support across a dispersed electorate. However, this assumes that diverse candidates are starting from a level playing field. As a first step to capturing more votes, women need both widespread community acceptance that they can be legitimate political leaders and credible backing by political parties.

How did women fare in political parties?

The five women elected since independence were all backed by political parties, yet in this election, close to half of the women contested as independents and women's position within the major parties was marginal. Two out of the top three ranking political parties, the Graon mo Jastis Pati and the Reunification Movement for Change, endorsed no women candidates. The second-ranked and Vanuatu's oldest party, the Vanua'aku Pati, fielded two women out of 27 candidates. The recently formed Oceania Transformation Movement had the highest representation of women candidates, supporting three women out of a total of 15 candidates, yet being a new party, it lacked the resources to provide financial backing for campaigning and no candidates from this party were elected.

In 2020, the most successful political party, the Graon Mo Jastis Pati, fielded the least number of candidates (see Willie 2020). In multi-member electorates, the risk of vote splitting amongst party members is high (Morgan 2008), therefore electoral success is more likely to be achieved when political parties provide strong backing to a smaller number of candidates. Diana Meltek of the Vanua'aku Pati won 566 votes in Malekula, close to the 835 votes needed to win the seventh seat of this multi-member electorate. Yet, the Vanua'aku Pati fielded four candidates in this electorate, including Kaltalio Simeon who secured 568 votes. Further analysis is required to determine if vote splitting affected Meltek's success in this electorate.

The lack of women's representation in political parties has been identified as an issue for quite some time (see Donald 2002). A women-led party, the Lelelon Vanua Democratic Party was formed in 2018, but did not field any candidates in the 2020 elections. According to the party's secretary-general, Andrina Thomas, the party was formed out of a frustration that the larger, established political parties do not endorse or support women:

We decided enough is enough. We were being side-stepped, we put ourselves forward but they'll choose another one or two men standing in the same constituency. So the women said, we'll create our own political party so the women can field our own candidates ... The problem with the traditional political parties, it's usually the men that take the preferences, and it's very hard for women to go in.³

Supporting candidates requires payment of a VT100,000 registration fee per candidate and estimated campaigning costs of anywhere between 2.5 million and 5 million vatu (approximately AU\$30,000 to AU\$60,000). The party's fundraising strategies — sausage sizzles, dinner dances and selling kava — could not compete with the significant sponsorship that major parties can attract.

The formation of a women-led party is indicative of the work-around strategies that women use when there is no room for women leaders in a male-dominated space and women are left to attempt to influence mainstream agendas from the sidelines rather than from within. [Programs](#) are in place to bring about locally led cultural change and greater acceptance of women's leadership through working with men and community leaders. Further to building acceptance of women's leadership, credible political party backing is an important factor for women's electoral success. In addition, the aims of the SNTV system to enable representation of minority groups needs review. The newly elected leaders in 2020 face challenges ahead with recovery from Cyclone Harold and management of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. While the political outlook for many countries is uncertain, hopes will be pinned on success for women in the 2024 elections.

Notes on author

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Endnotes

1. According to the [consolidated electoral list](#) released by the Vanuatu Electoral Office on 10 March 2020 and election results published by the Vanuatu Electoral Office on 7 April 2020.
2. Andrina Thomas 24/3/2020. Secretary-General, Lelelon Vanua Democratic Party, personal communication.
3. Ibid.

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