Small fish swimming in the shape of a shark: why politicians join political parties in the Pacific Islands

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Abstract

Political parties are ubiquitous features of contemporary models of representative democracy and are widely believed to be integral to transition, and yet persistently democratic Pacific Island countries tend to have ‘weakly’ institutionalised parties – some have none at all – that have little influence on the mobilisation of voters during elections. Given that party theory largely assumes that politicians form parties to win elections, I ask why, given the commonly cited irrelevance of party politics in much of the Pacific, politicians join political parties at all. Drawing on 96 biographical accounts – including 72 in-depth interviews – I interpret the explanations politicians give for joining, leaving and changing parties. I identify three narratives. The first accords with an augmented rational-actor model, the second with a responsible parties model, while the third points to intrinsic motivations that are largely overlooked in the existing literature. I conclude that a comprehensive account must include all three interpretations.

Keywords: Political parties, small island states, party aid, Pacific Islands, politicians, political elites, interpretivism

* A slightly amended version of this article is forthcoming with Commonwealth and Comparative Politics

Introduction

In Anthony Downs' (1957) classic *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, parties exist to win elections. For the most part, this narrow rational-actor model permeates mainstream understandings of why party systems occur and how they operate throughout the world (for review see White 2006). In contrast, while political parties are apparent in the eight Pacific Island countries considered here, the consensus in the case study literature, which tends to focus on informal practices rather than formal processes, is that they have little influence on the mobilisation of voters with candidates instead relying on personality and localised loyalties to win public office (for review see Crocombe 2008: 423-436). The presence of these cases raises important questions, including why politicians bother joining political parties in the Pacific if they have limited capacity to mobilise voters? I identify three answers. The first is an augmented version of the rational-actor model; parties may not mobilize voters but they are symbolically important and membership has implications for the distribution of ministerial portfolios in a Westminster system. The second conforms to a responsible parties model where politicians support the development of a party system as a means of improving democratic practice. The third points to intrinsic motivations that are embedded within life experiences, including personal friendships, family relationships and community engagement. Any comprehensive account of why politicians join parties in the eight Pacific Island countries considered here must necessarily incorporate all three narratives.

Since Schattschneider (1942), the democratization literature has largely assumed that political parties are a ubiquitous if not contingent aspect of democratic transition. This view of party politics is largely based on the Anglo-European or 'Western' experience and the 'mass class' parties of the 19th and 20th centuries (see Scarrow 2006). The assumption is that for elections to be genuinely competitive, representation needs to occur in a systematic and durable way; and parties are the best means by which this is achieved (Aldrich, 2009: 196).

And although this understanding of political parties is increasingly contested by the burgeoning body of scholarship highlighting declining party memberships and broader depoliticization trends in these democracies (for review see Corbett 2014a), it remains salient among democracy promotion practitioners in particular who see parties as providing systematic representation of policies and ballot access for candidates.

Specifically, the importance placed on genuinely competitive elections and systematic representation in the democratization process is linked by theorists and practitioners to a belief that political parties provide for more accountable government and therefore better or good governance (Carothers, 2006; Burnell and Gerrits, 2010; Veenendaal, 2013). In contrast, countries or polities without entrenched party systems are generally cast as undemocratic due to the limited choices that confront voters, with candidates campaigning on personal rather than ideological grounds and where governments are unable to pursue consistent policy agendas but instead succumb to patronage-based or clientelistic pressures (Stokes, 2007). Reflecting this, there has been a considerable push among global advocates of democratization to foster the establishment of political parties in new democracies through the provision of ‘party aid’.ⁱ

With this in mind, the material presented here has implications on three levels. At the *macro level* this article provides empirical material to support critiques of a Downs’ (1957) inspired ‘winning elections’ thesis. At the *meso level* it contributes to the literature on ‘party aid’ by showing how the aims and objectives of this endeavour conflict with the leadership context described here. At the *micro-level* it adds to the sparse literature on party politics in the Pacific Islands. This literature, as we shall see, has long observed that parties rarely mobilise voters and yet has not sought to understand why politicians still join parties.

My analysis is based on the assumption that political parties are, at some level, created by political actors – they are endogenously determined – and so any account of the

operation and function of parties must pay close attention to the reasons politicians give for being involved (Aldrich, 2007: 197). Perversely, there is a relative dearth of literature on this subject. In part, we can infer, this reflects the dominance of narrow rational-actor models in much political science scholarship. These models do not discount the preferences of politicians but for the purpose of predictive modelling they tend to assume they are fixed. An augmented rational-actor model, as I will illustrate, provides important insights into the nature of political behaviour in the Pacific but, I argue, it can only take us so far. Attempts to ‘broaden the menu’ are not uncommon in the social sciences (for example see Green & Shapiro, 1994; Ostrom, 1998; Kahneman, 2011). As such, the contribution of this article stems from both the empirical material harnessed to support this view and the interpretive approach (see Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; Bevir, 2010) I employ that emphasises the historically contingent nature of the meanings and beliefs political actors ascribe to their actions.

Interpretive research is typically based on constructivist-subjectivist rather than realist-objectivist propositions.ⁱⁱ The aim is to *understand* the webs of significance – generated by uncovering the meanings and beliefs that inform human actions – within which political actors live their lives. The assumption is that people have reasons for their actions – conscious and unconscious – and that a key task for scholars of politics is to uncover what these reasons are. The data for this article was collected as part of a larger book-length project about the life stories of politicians in the Pacific Islands that encompasses all 14 independent and self-governing Pacific countries.ⁱⁱⁱ Here I am specifically interested in the eight countries identified in Table 1 that have ‘weakly’ institutionalised political parties. Of those that I have excluded, Fiji has historically (prior to the 2006 coup) had a relatively entrenched party system while the Pacific’s smallest political entities (the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Nauru, Tuvalu and Niue) have, for the most part, had no parties at all.

Interviews and published life histories were complemented by observation-based research: spending time with politicians on the campaign trail, in the constituency, and at various meetings (campaign committees, party gatherings and international forums). The number of interviews conducted in each country is not representative in a quantitative sense, especially given the diversity of populations and parliament sizes across these countries, but sought to understand the breadth of experiences.

I have outlined the methodological tools that I used in this project and how I went about employing them in greater detail elsewhere (Corbett 2014b) so I will not go over old ground here. In summary, the analytic goal of interpretive research is to provide enough information to convince the reader that I am depicting the shared experience of politicians ‘from within their world, rather than outside it’ (Reeher, 2006:23). Thus, the standard is plausibility – of perspectives that we imagine or feel are right, rather than scientific proof demonstrated via correlation and covariance (Reeher, 2006:23). To substantiate this perspective, where possible I use extensive quotations to provide a sense of the politicians’ voice. Specifically, as I will discuss further below, while I have interviewed politicians who have not joined parties, due to the question under consideration I have primarily relied on the responses of those who have. Quotes were primarily chosen on the basis of succinctness and in most cases could have been substituted for several others. However, this voice is ultimately constructed by me and as such represents patterns that I have identified as emerging from the collected information: it is an ‘interpretation of interpretations’ (Bevir, 2010, 436).

This type of method and approach has its limitations – interviews can provide a platform for self-justification for example – but the more we conduct the more confidence we can have in the patterns that emerge (Xu and Weller, 2009:17). Interviews were semi-structured and biographical in nature and as a result do not easily lend themselves to coding or quantitative analysis.^{iv} Importantly, as with all research of this nature, this portrayal is

unavoidably shaped by the level of access I was granted and the views of those I spoke with. However, in the spirit of Ariel Ahram's (2011) call for greater acknowledgement of how comparative and area studies can complement each other, I maintain that this approach augments the existing literature by providing a perspective missing thus far.

Finally, a word on motivations. Much of the popular intrigue and scepticism associated with politicians surrounds their intentions: do they stand for election to further the public interest or simply to pursue personal gains? It is a question as old as the study of politics itself. Rather than reinforcing a dichotomised view of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, exploring the rationalisations and justifications that politicians' offer for why they join political parties enables us to gain a more nuanced understanding of political life. Cynics may maintain that the stories presented here are nothing more than further proof that politicians are at best insincere and hypocritical, and at worst outright liars. I prefer to follow Donald Searing's (1994: 389) argument that we cannot solely judge the motivations of politicians on models drawn from their actions, and that assumptions based entirely on socialisation or utility-maximisation, for example, are no substitute for empirical study. Instead, echoing Colin Hay (2007: 162), I contend that this depiction of politics as entirely concerned with the pursuit of individual utility both distorts and denies the complexity of the human condition.

Political Parties in the Pacific Islands

The Pacific Islands represents a 'natural laboratory' for discussions about why politicians join political parties and so I will begin by providing a brief description of the history of party politics in this part of the world. A few caveats. First, it is not my aim in this article to provide an account of why political parties are relatively entrenched or 'institutionalized' in some Pacific countries more than others. This subject has already been well canvassed and so I will only sketch a brief summary so as to situate my contribution (for a list of the different

political parties in each Pacific country see Fraenkel, 2008: 47).^v Similarly, while the reflections of politicians generally endorse the view that parties have a negligible impact on voter preferences, I accept the prevailing consensus in the literature that this is the case rather than surveying voter preferences (for review see Fraenkel 2009). Nor do I provide an in-depth analysis of why not all politicians join political parties – as I highlight, some politicians do not see advantages in being part of an organisation that has little bearing on their electability while others are wary of the character of some party leaders, or the ‘western’ nature of party politics.

Despite its ubiquity, there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a political party (for review see White 2006). As outlined, the consensus is that parties are groups of citizens seeking to win elections and by extension government. Given the nature of the cases under examination here, I employ Randall and Svåsand’s (2002:12) definition of parties as ‘organizations, however rudimentary, set up more or less intentionally and with some kind of formal rules and objectives’. In this respect, I follow Mainwaring and Torcal’s (2006) argument that institutionalization is critical to understanding party formation in ‘Third Wave’ democracies (although it should be said that, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji aside, Huntington (1991) did not include Pacific Island countries in his analysis). Much of the existing party literature assumes that parties have ‘strong roots in society’ (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006: 204) but in the Pacific this has not been the case as programmatic and ideological linkages tend to be trumped by personal characteristics. Parties may have a constitution and nominal membership, a party office or headquarters, and perhaps a few paid staff. They may announce and distribute a policy platform and hold campaign rallies. However, they do not have the same tradition of influence or ‘structuring effect’ (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006: 208) on electoral outcomes that is common elsewhere. Consequentially, we need to revisit the dominant theoretical literature to understand this set of practices.

There are exceptions to this broad trend. As mentioned above, in the 17 years immediately after independence in Samoa there were no political parties with politics dominated by *matai* [chiefs or heads of family] (So'o, 2008). The Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) took power in the 1980s and has remained largely unchallenged for the last three decades. Opposition parties have formed and won seats (the Samoan Democratic United Party and Tautua Samoa Party for example), but have not come close to gaining a parliamentary majority. In Tonga, the legislative assembly has historically been dominated by an appointed majority of nobles (see Campbell 2011). In the late 1980's a pro-democracy movement emerged to contest the remaining 'people's representatives' parliamentary seats under the leadership of 'Akilisi Pohiva. In the 2010 election, the first where a majority of seats were open to people's representatives, Pohiva's group won the most seats in parliament but failed to form government.

For the purpose of comparison we can think of these parties as points on a continuum with the loose groupings common to Marshall Islands and Kiribati at one end and Samoa's dominant HRPP on the other. But, even in Samoa, multiple candidates run for the same electorate under the HRPP banner (candidates pick the party rather than the party picking candidates) and the profile and reputation of the individual politician is generally deemed to be more important than the policies they represent, as this quote from a Samoan politician illustrates:

Right now, 2011, I would say I would run for government. But I have always believed the old adage 'politics makes strange bedfellows' ... Maybe in the next five years I will be saying "no, I'm going with these guys because I see that they are organised", and I go out to my constituency and my constituency want me to go there, you know, there are those factors. Because I have had the benefit of being with government and going with this other opposition party ... (Samoan politician)

Consequently, while the dominance of the HRPP in Samoa may currently constitute a more stable 'system' than elsewhere in the Pacific, in all cases party institutions still do not resemble 'mass class' parties and the practice of politics still tends to be described in similar terms (localisation, personalisation etc.) to all other Pacific countries.

There are three main explanations for the apparent 'weakness' of political parties in the Pacific region. The first can broadly be classified as 'culturalist' (for a typical example see Morgan 2005) and is particularly apparent in the literature on the politics of Western Melanesia (PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu). Western Melanesia is among the most culturally and linguistically diverse regions in the world with around one quarter of all global languages spoken in these three countries. This 'hyper-fractionalisation' is said to work against the formation of other social cleavages like class. Traditionally in Western Melanesia leadership tended to be dominated by 'big men' whose 'achieved' status was generated via debts and obligations derived from forms of gifting and exchange (for the classic taxonomy see Sahlins, 1963). In contrast, more 'ascribed' or hereditary chieftaincies are said to underpin social cleavages in Polynesia and parts of Micronesia (Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Samoa and Vanuatu all retain a formal place for chiefs in their institutional architecture whilst nobles sit in the Tongan Assembly). This crude typology has been heavily critiqued by anthropologists but it remains salient in the literature which sees contemporary politics as a clash between 'traditional' and 'modern' political systems (for discussion see Lawson, 1996).

The second explanation relates to geography. While PNG and Fiji have relatively large populations (approx. 8 million and 800,000 respectively) most other Pacific Island countries have resident populations of between 50,000-200,000 people. Some are smaller still. Unsurprisingly, many commentators believe that this significantly affects political dynamics and the formation and function of political parties (see Anckar and Anckar, 2000).

Although this correlation has never been formally tested, and appears to be restricted to the Pacific (many Caribbean countries have party systems for example, see Veenendaal 2013a), we can imagine a tipping point or threshold at which the relative cost of an institutionalised party meets population size. Certainly, Fiji aside, countries not included in this study because of the absence of parties – Niue, Nauru, Tuvalu, Palau and FSM – tend to have smaller populations than their neighbours (Cook Islands is the main exception as it has two main parties despite a population of around 10,000).

Ethnicity is the third explanation used to explain party formation in the Pacific. For the most part cross-cutting sociological cleavages that are believed to underpin party formation elsewhere (Sartori, 1976) are absent in the Pacific; leaving ethnicity as an important explanatory variable (Reilly, 2001).^{vi} In relation to the eight countries considered here, a belief that ethnic fragmentation causes political instability in Melanesia has underpinned various reform attempts. PNG’s Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC), and changes to the electoral system (First Past the Post (FPP) to Limited Preferential Voting), are examples of attempts to manufacture stability via legislative means (for discussion see Wolfers et al, 2011). Less extensive but similar measures have been undertaken elsewhere in the Pacific (in Samoa and Cook Islands for example) and are under consideration in other countries (Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in particular). For the most part, these reforms are underpinned by disillusionment with the unstable nature of weak party politics, including persistent side-switching and votes-of-no-confidence. Importantly, despite their differences, in nearly all cases Pacific Island countries are seen to fall short of a Schattschneider-esque ideal.

Table 1: Political Entities and Political Parties in the Pacific Islands

TEXT

Sources: Information on parties and sovereign status can be found on the World Factbook website: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> (accessed 15/10/2013). Freedom House rankings are likewise available from: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world> (accessed 15/10/2013). Aside from some Tongan appointees, this list is entirely made up of elected MPs. It includes draft sections from Chris Chevalier's biography of Solomon Mamaloni in lieu of the published monograph.

Given this, one cannot help but ask why politicians in the Pacific Islands bother joining political parties? The desire of politicians to remain members of 'mass class' parties, particularly in the United States, is often attributed to incumbency advantage. Gary Jacobson (2000), for example, argues that because it is simply impossible to meet more than a fraction of the electorate during a single campaign, party identification is the central means by which MPs mobilise voters. But this is quite literally not the case in the Pacific Islands – PNG is something of an exception due to its relative size – where constituencies are often made up of a few thousand voters (some only have hundreds) and politicians are expected to 'know everybody' (see Corbett 2013a). And, as outlined, there is often significant overlap between politicians' relatives or 'base vote' and their constituency.

One answer is that some do not, preferring instead to run as independents. But, many do. As outlined in Table 1, two parties have dominated Cook Islands politics since independence in the 1960s – the Cook Islands Party and the Democratic Party – although side switching is now more common than it was only decades ago. In Cook Islands and Samoa parties have headquarters and some staff. This is not the case in Marshall Islands which has had a number of loose political 'groupings' in recent years – the United People's Party, United Democratic Party, Aelon Kein Ad and Kien Eo Am – nor Kiribati which has three – Boutokaan Te Koaua Party, Kamaeuraon Te I-Kiribati Party and the Maurin Kiribati Party. In Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and PNG multiple parties win seats at every election, and coalitions and associations are fluid. As we shall see, the formation of government sees regular side switching as members jockey for ministerial portfolios. In part due to its constitutional architecture – prior to 2010 the majority of members were selected from among

the nobility – Tonga is an exception. ‘Akilisi Pohiva’s Democratic Party, which emerged from the three decade long pro-democracy movement, is the largest parliamentary grouping. However, it does not hold government which was instead formed by a coalition of 9 noble’s and key independent people’s representatives.

Finally, a word on the backgrounds of Pacific politicians. For the most part political candidates in the region tend to share similar characteristics – they are mostly male (the Pacific has some of the lowest levels of female parliamentary representation in the world, see Baker 2014), have above average education (often from overseas), come from careers in the civil service (although this is broadening), and have strong support from ‘political’ families (including chiefly lineage in some countries) – with the absence of party facilitated career trajectories, of the types common to institutionalised party systems, the most obvious point of difference (see Crocombe 2008, Corbett 2012, Corbett and Wood 2013). That is, while some politicians do hold positions in party institutions before becoming MPs, it is relatively rare. They can in many respects be justifiably called elite (Hau’ofa 1987: 3) but rather than rent seeking cartels, politicians largely fund their own campaigns privately or via community fundraising and family donations. This cost is particularly significant as in most Pacific countries incumbent turnover is relatively high (as much as 50% at each election, see Fraenkel 2009). To meet these costs, aspiring prime ministers finance promising candidates in return for their pledged support. In resource rich nations (PNG and Solomon Islands in particular) commercial interests also increasingly fund key candidates and potential leaders.

Why Join? The Strategic Imperative

I was an independent, not aligned to any political party. Political parties are a Western concept quite foreign to Solomon Islanders... As the nation progressed from the Governing Council to the Legislative Assembly in 1974, Solomon Islander politicians began to realise the advantages of disciplined groups of MPs who would

vote as a block, but party membership did not relate to any distinct ideological basis (former Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Sir Peter Kenilorea, 2008:208).

The strategic advantage that can be gained by MPs acting as a disciplined group is the foremost rationale for all political parties or coalitions. Politics has many purposes but one of the most central is the capacity to muscle support in favour of a particular outcome, and individuals pooling resources and acting as a group is the most obvious way to do so. As the very apt Pacific metaphor in the title of this article suggests, small fish can appear larger and more menacing when, working together, they swim in the shape of a shark. And while this narrow rational-actor model of collective action has its limits, it is the most sensible place to start any discussion of why politicians in the Pacific Islands join political parties. However, while Downs (1957) argued that parties emphasise electoral activities at the expense of all other functions, in the countries considered here this is rarely the case. Indeed, commentators more commonly argue that most, with the possible exception of Pohiva's pro-democracy movement in Tonga, parties primarily exist to form government (Fraenkel 2009). That is, their strategic relevance largely begins after the votes are counted – not during elections – when the task of cobbling together a government begins (in Kiribati parties are important to the nomination of Presidential candidates for example). That is not to say they are unimportant during elections – having a party is one way of signalling to the electorate that you are a serious candidate – but most members believe that their personal appeal is more important to any policy platform.

To account for the different types of coalitions and parliamentary alliances that exist in the region, case study scholars increasingly turn to the literature on patronage and clientelism to explain the nature of representative politics (again, this is not restricted to the Pacific, see Chabal and Daloz 1999). Herbert Kitschelt (2009: 618) provides two ways of thinking about the type of strategic calculation that MPs make in this scenario. The first is

what he calls deliberative calculation where candidates for public office take the preferences of at least some voters and rival candidates into account when determining their own course of action. Most politicians across the Pacific believe that money politics is on the rise and so, in this interpretation, incumbent and aspiring MPs align themselves with well-resourced prime ministerial or presidential hopefuls so as to increase their electoral appeal. Candidates and voters, in this explanation, are locked in an instrumental relationship based on obligation and dependence. Retaining office, and thus their patron status, is the baseline objective for incumbents while ‘personal rents, glory, policy or targeted benefits for constituents’ are secondary aims (Kitschelt, 2009: 618).

The reflections of politicians, however, highlight that these secondary objectives may be more entwined than Kitschelt’s (2009: 618) distinction assumes. While not all of the countries considered here strictly conform to a Westminster model – Marshall Islands and Kiribati have Presidents rather than Prime Ministers, for example – in all eight countries Cabinets are chosen on the floor of parliament. And, for many politicians, their capacity to make a difference and thus secure re-election depends on obtaining a ministerial portfolio, as this Samoan politician, who joined the HRPP in the early 1990s, reflects:

[I joined] For other selfish reasons, he [the opposition leader] is from the neighbouring constituency ... If he becomes Prime Minister it is very unlikely that I will be a Minister in his Cabinet because you can’t have two from the same larger district. (Samoan politician)

In many respects contemporary Samoa is the extreme case of this as, given the predominance of the HRPP, any candidate who harbours ministerial ambitions is likely to join that party. Similarly, the decisions of MPs to join parties or governing coalitions after elections, or switch sides during parliamentary terms, is often heavily influenced by the prospect of securing a ministerial portfolio:

I had to be in government, I had to be with the Prime Minister to get the money to do the development. Simple. So, I did it. The first project K13 million, I promised if I was there I would build it, and I built it. (Papua New Guinean politician)

Community leaders can also be influential in this process with former Solomon Islands MP Sam Alasia (1997) recounting how decisions regarding his allegiance in parliament were influenced by his constituency committee, which included the paramount local leader from his area.

That is not to say that every MP wants to be in Cabinet (opposition MPs in Samoa consciously make this choice although it must be noted that some are disgruntled former HRPP ministers). Due to a constitutional cap on the number of portfolios, the decision to turn down a ministerial position is of most significance in Kiribati where the strategic advantage of holding one is of increased magnitude. However, as this extract highlights, it does occur as some see their strategic objectives to be best met by remaining on the backbench:

I would rather stay as an ordinary member because I work more with the people ... Maybe, yes, you can think of a being a minister because you get more benefits. You get extra money, extra car, extra travel and all of that ... It doesn't matter to me ... The minister's only say 'yes the answer to that, that', finish. For us ordinary members 'why is that, what is going to happen', you know?

[Author] You get known as being vocal?

... I feel more free ... I moved to the opposition because they are always attacking ...

(I-Kiribati politician)

But, for most politicians in the Pacific, ministerial office is the goal: it is where they and their supporters want them to be and so their strategic calculations are built around this imperative.

The pay-off is twofold. First, ministers have greater influence and as a result their capacity to deliver services for their constituency is increased; thus enhancing their re-election chances. Second, ministers enjoy greater prestige, salary and perks (vehicle, office, staff, travel etc.). In this sense, ‘public interest’ becomes hard to define. While party formation is generally idealised as a mechanism for pursuing national policies, MPs can seek membership to pursue specifically local concerns. And, while it is tempting to interpret these decisions as hard and fast transactions, leaders in particular bemoan their inability to predict whether the members they finance will support them when required:

When we had the elections for Prime Minister earlier this year. My members deserted me ... But some of these people the party funded them. But it is not unusual for a candidate to seek assistance from you and then go to other parties and say you are from that party and seek assistance. Some of us have an open mind on this one, we cross our fingers and just hope that if they win they will stick with you. (Solomon Islands politician)

Conversely, some politicians worry about the impact this type of manoeuvring will have on their reputation:

One of the biggest things, when you start jumping from one, become a ‘ping-pong,’ you tarnish your name publically. [People say] “He is a money-monger”. (Solomon Islands politician)

Others are more calculating still. As the following quote by a Ni-Vanuatu politician illustrates, in multi-member constituencies, or those with overlapping seats, which, with the exception of Solomon Islands, are common across the region, the local community can benefit from having MPs on both sides of the chamber:

We [members of the same constituency] are in different political parties but we work together. We try and divide ourselves as we don't want to be in the same basket. This is strategy, you have to strategise in politics [laughter]. So, we work together to help all of the communities [in the constituency].

[Ni-Vanuatu politician]

In contrast to deliberative calculation, the second way that Kitschelt (2009: 618) conceives of strategic evaluation is as a form of non-rational psychological attachment. Already this begins to point us towards the limits of a purely material maximisation explanation but we can begin by exploring aspects of this interpretation that could be conceived as enhancing the utility of individual politicians. While most argue that party policies hold little sway with voters, being attached to a party, or being the leader of a party, can nonetheless be tactically important. Parties, in this interpretation, are less about coherent policy and more about politicians signalling to the electorate that they are credible enough to merit attention. Parties denote status, even if this is more rhetorical than reflective of numbers of members and infrastructure in the way that the 'mass class' parties claim legitimacy.

More significantly, however, in a Pacific context is the connection of parties to particular leaders. Kitschelt (2009: 618) refers to this as trait identification and the appeal of charismatic leadership; where MPs join parties to stand side by side with a particular leader. This can have electoral appeal and, as we shall see, provide intrinsic satisfaction as well:

[Why] National Alliance [?] Because the Prime Minister, I wanted to stand with the Grand Chief, Somare. (Papua New Guinean politician)

Independence leaders like inaugural Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare, due to their valorised status as the founding fathers of their respective nations, generate a particular admiration, but they are not alone. Most politicians come to

political life with the help of mentors and other benefactors and these individuals often play a significant role in shaping why politicians stand for who they do. As Ian Campbell (2011: 228) observes in Tonga, some politicians have had an easy ride into the Legislative Assembly on Pohiva's coat tails.

For the leader themselves, the incentive to start a party can be grounded in their individual ambition. Pioneered by Joseph Schlesinger (1966), the use of the term ambition to explain political behaviour resonates strongly with the integrated nature of American politics (see also Fox and Lawless, 2005). Ambition, in this view, drives politicians to continuously seek higher office while the predictability of the political system, defined by two-party politics and incumbent advantage, and the availability of alternative employment in ancillary political positions, provides the requisite stability for a political career. These later conditions, including the capacity to make politics a career, are largely unapparent in the Pacific but ambition can still help us understand why it is that some politicians are prepared to risk enormous amounts of money on election campaigns.

Why Join? The Responsible Imperative

The main alternative to a rational actor model is what White (2006:14) summarises as the 'responsible parties model' where parties perform an important function in a democratic system by aggregating and presenting policy platforms to the voting public. Certainly, a common cause or ideology is an obvious starting point for most political parties and, despite Kenilorea's reflections at the beginning of the previous section, many parties and their members across the region, including those in Solomon Islands, profess to have ideological beginnings. For some of the Pacific's most high profile parties – Pangu Pati, Vanua'aku Pati and the Cook Islands Party for example – independence was the primary uniting cause as a growing group of 'western' educated islanders came together to talk about and later agitate

for the end of colonial rule, as one of the founders of Pangu, and later Deputy-Prime Minister of PNG, Sir Albert Maori Kiki (1968: 148-149), remembers:

The idea of a political party came very slowly to me and to most of my colleagues. In a sense the actual formation of the party took place rather suddenly in June 1967, but to me the real beginnings go right back to early 1964 when we started the Bully Beef Club at Administrative College. There were eight of us, seven men and one woman, who started the Bully Beef Club... Its numbers grew to twelve and by now we had very dynamic fellows in it, like Joseph Nombri and Michael Somare. It is in this club that our political consciousness was developed ...

Not all self-determination movements followed this exact course but even in more informal groupings, the experience and networks gained through education, proved crucial to the formation of these early coalitions:

I can even name the bars [in Hawaii]: The Blue Goose, Charley's Tavern ... where all of these discussions took place ... We were watching our colleagues from Fiji and from the other [Pacific Island countries] ...

And, while they were doing this mainly in their own jurisdictions they became sort of an inspiration to the rest of the Pacific.

(Marshallese politician)

Nor were all of these initial parties were pro-independence – quite the opposite. PNG's United Party, for example, initially opposed rapid decolonisation (May, 2008: 98).

This type of unity, however, is largely seen to be isolated to the independence period. Party theory as it relates to 'mass class' parties usually begins with Duverger (1964) but, as others have illustrated, this model has little explanatory power in the Pacific Islands despite the prevalence of the FPP electoral system (the possible exception is the HRPP in Samoa, see

So'o 2008). Political parties were relatively influential in the region around independence. Parties like Pangu Pati in PNG, Vanua'aku Pati in Vanuatu, and the Cook Islands Party in Cook Islands, rode a wave of support in those first elections that delivered independence leaders considerable majorities (this trend is not restricted to the Pacific, see Randall, 2006: 391). Since then, however, parties have tended to fracture with coalitions rising and falling on the strength of shifting alliances manufactured by leaders, underscoring Randall and Svåsand's (2002: 19) observation that such organisations are ephemeral and the antithesis of the institutionalisation that donors in particular desire (see also Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006). For those Pacific countries without parties, coalitions or groupings are constantly shifting, as former Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Bikenibeu Paeniu (in Johnstone and Michael Powels, 2012), articulates:

No [parties], just groupings, each Member of Parliament is independent. It was gentleman's groupings and agreements and all that ... it's a numbers game. So you have to choose [the prime minister] from within the numbers that supported you.

When seeking to explain the decline of these parties post-independence, most commentators point to the absence of other ideological linkages related to class, for example. The motif 'development' could be construed as a contemporary ideology that nearly all parties and politicians in the region ascribe to. And yet the overwhelming view in the literature is that this is not underpinned by a coherent policy platform that conforms to a conventional 'left-right' spectrum (Fraenkel, 2009). Certain social cleavages are more important in some countries than others. Historically, the eastern (Ratak) and western (Ralik) island groupings in Marshall Islands have acted as the basis for parliamentary coalitions with clusters of politicians supporting certain traditional leaders, although this is changing, whilst the Highlands bloc has, at times, been influential in PNG. Religious denominations can be important to understanding the different groups that form in Kiribati while to some extent

Francophone and Anglophone factions retain some influence in Vanuatu. In other parts of the Pacific, business interests, like the links between logging companies and certain groups of MPs in Solomon Islands, matter. Aside from Fiji, labour ‘parties’ have also emerged in parts of Western Melanesia but ‘mass class’ support has largely failed to materialise.

Similarly, while acknowledging that ambitious politicians who wish to remain in office pick policies that they think will appeal to the public (and ‘development’ is the classically cited example), it is important to note that individuals do not see their ideological preferences as entirely instrumental but as grounded in their life experiences, principles and beliefs:

I believe that Vanua’aku Pati is a home grown party ... all of the other parties are influenced by the other people. Like the Greens ... all of our currency, the flag, the national flag, those colours were taken from the Vanua’aku Pati colours and the moto, and the emblem ... So, those are some of those, but the main one was that land would be owned by the indigenous (Ni-Vanuatu politician).

This is particularly true of politicians who join parties on religious grounds – a topic I have addressed in greater detail elsewhere (Corbett 2013b) – who see their choices as being informed by faith. As Richard Eves (2008) highlights in relation to PNG, some parties carry religious names (the Christian Democratic Party for example), whilst MPs point to church affiliation as reasons for why they join particular coalitions:

I was with [Manasseh] Sogavare... because we are in the same church, Seventh Day Adventist. I said to him: ‘Sogavare this is our church belief and I want you to know that ... I am here to make you the next Prime Minister.’ (Solomon Islands politician)

Given this and the associated minimal impact party identification has on voter mobilisation, at some level we must recognise that politicians persist with parties out of a

genuine desire or belief not only in their party platform but in the need for parties and a party system in their respective countries (much like donor advocates of ‘party aid’ do). Even in Pacific countries that don’t have parties this sentiment is apparent. Don Shuster (2009:12) found in the early 1990s that the majority (around 70 per cent) of congressmen in Palau supported the creation of parties. In Nauru, some politicians, particularly among the post-independence generation, believe that voters are dissatisfied with politics as usual and instead want the type of ideological representation that political scientists generally endorse. The party Naoero Amo or Nauru First was formed for just this purpose, although many of its initial members are now on opposite sides of the chamber.

Why Join? Intrinsic Rewards

Both of these models are important starting points for any discussion of why politicians join political parties in the Pacific Islands but, as we have seen, there are some obvious cracks. Even if we broaden the definition of rational beyond the maximisation of material interests to include more psychological factors, such as trait identification and charismatic leadership, these explanations do not fully capture the depth and intensity of the lived experience for human actors; and politicians, despite the often cited stereotypes, are people too.

In-line with the personalisation and localisation theme, politics in the Pacific is largely a family or kin-based affair and so for many MPs their mentors are also relatives who first encouraged them to run. As I have explored elsewhere (Corbett and Liki forthcoming), this is particularly true of women politicians but it is of more general relevance. Not that running for the same party as ones parents is a rule – politics generally runs in the family but it also has the unique capacity to split families apart with siblings running against each other, for example – but it is a prominent theme:

Well, it was always the party, even before I got into politics, that was what my constituency, my family, my parents all supported [that party]. I was just for it. I was just for it. That's why I continue to be at it now (Samoan politician).

The decision by leaders in particular to spend significant sums of money to garner the support of colleagues undermines their capacity to profit financially from politics, especially given the risks associated with success in a fluid political environment where incumbent turnover is high. In which case, things like friendship, for example, can be important:

Nobody had any policies. Basically it was somebody you knew and that you think you can work well with.

(Author) So personality?

Yes. Sir Peter [former prime minister] went to King George VI and I was also in King George in his last year so I knew Peter from school (Solomon Islands politician).

And although this type of conduct is commonly viewed as nepotism:

... play mates, business partners, that is one way that they dish out money when they get into ministries huh. They talk to their drinking mates and all that ... they setup in a way that companies favour them and all sorts of things going on. (Papua New Guinean politician)

It can also be interpreted more positively as illustrating the implicit social dimension of all collective action.^{vii}

Conversely, while a leader's reputation can attract politicians to a particular party, it can also turn politicians away even if it serves their strategic interests. If enough people share this view, these personal grievances and disputes can also underpin new alliances, as the

following extract by former Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, Sir Tom Davis (1992: 235) illustrates:

I also obtained the distinct feeling that what some wanted was revenge for real or imagined personal slights that Albert [Henry] or the Cook Islands Party had perpetrated and I was to be the medium by which this could be achieved. The thought passed through my mind that I was building a political party based in a significant part on dissenters and defectors from Albert's Party.

In this respect, whilst the personalised nature of political life in the Pacific is often attributed to cultural factors, some politicians argue that this type of competitive party politics is the antithesis to the ideal of consensus that is often believed to be synonymous with a 'Pacific Way' of governing. In his description of how Vanuatu's National United Party functioned during the early 1990s, former deputy Prime Minister Sethy Regenvanu (2004: 164) reflected on how party government was soured by the influence of moneyed interests – particularly those of their main financial backer Dinh Van Than – creating '... a one man show, a party held hostage to money, power, and culture that is un-Melanesian in character'. Politicians who choose to switch sides attract much attention in the literature on politics and political parties in the Pacific precisely because they are seen to demonstrate the inherently Machiavellian nature of political elites. But this example, and that of the I-Kiribati politician who decided to join the opposition, demonstrates the extent to which some MPs are prepared to sacrifice personal gains for collective objectives by staying loyal to certain parties and leaders, as this extract about a politician who was initially denied endorsement by the Vanua'aku Pati also illustrates:

So, we decided to go independent, and we won. And, from day one, after the declaration ... I aligned myself with the Vanua'aku Pati and made a commitment that one of my aims in the Vanua'aku Pati was to re-build the party ... this is my second

term [and I have] never fought for a ministerial portfolio ... some colleagues of mine who come in maybe less than six months. They started to get into [portfolios] ... [shrugs shoulders] I made my commitment. (Ni-Vanuatu politician)

Importantly, while ambition is often seen as a driving motivation for politicians, in the Pacific many leaders claim to be reluctant candidates. And while this can be an important rhetorical strategy, given the costs (personal and financial) associated with entering politics this stance is understandable. Indeed, some are scouted by party leaders early on and groomed from a young age before they had really seriously considered standing:

... from 1995 onwards when I joined the ministry I started receiving visits from a political party which I have joined, the Boutokaan Te Koaua. Of course at that time I wasn't that interested in politics. I sort of vaguely knew what it was about but I didn't really take an interest in it. (I-Kiribati politician)

Consequently, reflecting these dynamics, due to their profile and reputation many are pressured to stand and so have little appetite for the strategic game. That is not to say that once elected politicians do not begin to love what they initially had no interest in – quite the opposite, this is in fact a very common reflection – but it is important to recognise that in the absence of professionalization trends (see Corbett 2013c) not every MP is driven by the need to be re-elected, and that many are quite relieved when their time in politics is over.

Conclusion: Broadening the Menu

The classic assumption in the democratization literature is that political parties are integral to democratic transition but most Pacific Island countries do not, and most likely will not, have strongly institutionalised parties. Against this conventional interpretation, Pacific Island countries are largely seen to suffer from a democratic deficit with the seemingly ad-hoc nature of parliamentary coalitions cast as the antithesis of the institutionalised ideal. 'Party

aid', along with associated legislative and constitutional measures, are seen as the cure to this political sickness. And yet, like elsewhere, these programs have largely failed to significantly alter political dynamics in favour of party systems (see Kinyondo, 2012). Better program design is often held up as the solution but, based on the broader view of why politicians join parties, it would appear that the impact of party aid, no matter how well implemented, is likely to remain limited.

In this article I have taken a different approach. Rather than seeking to explain why parties have limited influence I have instead focused on why politicians join political parties in the Pacific; a gap in the extant literature. By focusing on the meanings and beliefs that human actors ascribe to their actions I have identified three narratives. The first is an augmented rational-actor account where politicians seek to maximise their strategic advantage in the pursuit of ministerial portfolios in particular. The second conforms to the responsible parties model and the normative aim of ideological representation. The third draws out intrinsic motivations and values embedded within life experiences, including personal friendships, family relationships and community engagement. And, while different actors may identify with one of the explanations over others, all three are important to how we understand the group.

Aside from its relevance to the literatures on politics in the Pacific Islands, democratization and 'party aid', these findings also question the 'winning elections' imperative that permeates mainstream understandings of why party systems occur and how they operate throughout the world. By looking at weakly institutionalised rather than 'mass class' parties I have shown how strategic imperatives exist beyond just winning elections; that politicians retain ideological commitments – including to the idea of a party system – in the absence of obvious incumbent advantages, and illustrated how being part of a party provides intrinsic rewards that defy conventional interpretations, both in the Pacific and

elsewhere. In doing so I have argued that to better understand parties in the Pacific context we need to 'broaden the menu' to include all three explanations discussed here. In doing so we gain an insight into why, despite the commonly cited characteristics of political practice in these eight countries, parties exist at all.

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Notes

¹ In the Pacific, the main provider of party aid is the Australian government funded Centre for Democratic Institutions, who run regular training programs for party officials. Despite these attempts and the funding they attract, recent analysis suggests that most are ineffective in achieving their stated aim of significantly altering local political dynamics in favour of institutionalised political parties (Burnell and Gerrits, 2010; Weissenbach, 2010; Lazarus, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Critical realists, many of whom use similar methods and ask similar questions, despite retaining a commitment to a realist ontology, are an important exception (see Marsh, 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Corbett (forthcoming). In total, I undertook 111 interviews and canvassed roughly 40 published life histories (see Table 1) from across 14 Pacific Island countries.

^{iv} While broadly covering the region, the sample of in-depth interviews and life histories (autobiography and biography) relies on the experience of post-independence leaders, and politicians from Melanesia and Fiji in particular. Interviews were granted upon my stated commitment not to use names in any publications, and as far as possible suppress the identity of the interviewee.

^v For the broadest coverage see Rich et al (2008).

^{vi} This argument is particularly relevant in multi-ethnic Fiji.

^{vii} A non-Pacific comparison might be the Polish Beer-Lovers Party (see White, 2006: 5) which had satirical beginnings but later developed a broader policy platform and ultimately gained seats in parliament.