

A note on the Fiji electoral system

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Fiji adopted the alternative vote (AV) system as part of the 1997 constitution, and its finer details are set out in the 1998 Electoral Act.¹ Previously, the country had used an Anglo-American style first-past-the-post (or plurality) system. The new AV system, like its predecessors, reserves a substantial number of seats for members of specific ethnic groups, although now accompanied by 'open' or common roll seats. There are 46 reserved constituencies – 23 are for the ethnic Fijians, 19 for Fiji Indians, 3 for 'General' electors and one for those from the island of Rotuma.² In these communal constituencies, eligible citizens from Fiji's distinct groups vote for candidates from their own ethnic community. In addition, there are 25 open constituencies, where all eligible citizens vote together. Every eligible citizen may complete two ballot papers – one for a communal seat and one for an open seat. The boundaries of the various communal and open constituencies are not coterminous. Every geographical area in Fiji will be, in some way, covered by all five different types of constituency. All constituencies return only a single member to the 71-member *Bose Lawa* (parliament).

The alternative vote system is a preferential voting system. Voters are required to rank candidates. If no candidate gets a majority (50 per cent+1) at the first count, the lowest polling candidate is eliminated and his or her ballots are recounted to ascertain voter second preferences. If there is still no candidate with an outright majority, the next lowest polling candidate is eliminated and

Table 1 Outcome in the 2006 North Eastern General Communal constituency

Candidate	Party	Number of counts				
		1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Harry Robinson	UPP	528	545	561	941	Excl.
Nawaia Touakin	Independent	357	361	Excl.		
Rebo Terubea	FLP	383	391	423	Excl.	
David Christopher	SDL	1,467	1,478	1,511	1,547	1,639
Rocky Billings	NAPF	289	Excl.			
Robin Irwin	Independent	629	873	1,158	1,165	2,014
Informal votes		389				
Total votes		4,042				
Total valid votes		3,653				
Votes required for a majority	1,827					

Notes: UPP = United Peoples Party; FLP= Fiji Labour Party; SDL = Soqosoqo Duavata n Lewenivanua; NAPF = National Alliance Party of Fiji; Excl. = excluded.

his or her votes are again redistributed in accordance with preferences to the remaining contestants. This process of elimination and redistribution continues, if necessary, until there are only two candidates remaining.

Table 1 shows the outcome in one of the three General Electors' communal constituencies in 2006, where the outcome was ultimately decided at the fifth count. The total number of valid votes was 3,653, so the required majority threshold was 1,827 (50 per cent+1). No candidate achieved this at the first count, so the lowest polling candidate, the NAPF's Rocky Billings, was eliminated. Redistribution of his preference votes failed to yield a winner, and it required the elimination of three further candidates until, in a two-horse race, Robin Irwin passed the threshold by obtaining 2,014 votes, although he had received only 629 first preference votes.

Fiji's voting system uses a split format ballot paper, with an 'above-the-line' and a 'below-the-line' section. Voters are required to choose which section of the ballot paper they complete, but they may not complete both. The 'above-the-line' section of the ballot paper requires the voter to place a single tick next to a favoured party or candidate. Such ticks are taken to endorse the preferences lodged by political parties or candidates with the Fiji Elections Office shortly

before the polls. The ‘below-the-line’ section of the ballot paper requires the voter to rank candidates him or herself. Parties may lodge preferences with the Elections Office even in constituencies where they do not stand candidates. In such cases, they must list another party as first preference. Around 95 per cent of ballots at the elections of 1999, 2001 and 2006 were cast ‘above-the-line’.³ The consequence of this was that in constituencies where there was no winner at the first count, political parties had substantial control over outcomes.

In the case of the North Eastern General communal constituency, Robin Irwin’s victory owed much to party preferences, which controlled the redistribution of ballot papers that had been cast ‘above-the-line’. When the first candidate (Rocky Billings – NAPF) was excluded, most of his votes were transferred to Irwin because, as shown in Table 2 (column 5), NAPF had listed Irwin as second preference. The residual Billings votes that went to other candidates were ‘below-the-line’ ballots. Similarly, the second eliminated candidate, Nawaia Touakin (independent) gave second preference to Irwin. When the final two candidates were eliminated (FLP and UPP), Irwin benefited from having been placed as penultimate preference (5th) ahead of his major rival, the SDL’s David Christopher (6th), as shown in the first and

Table 2 Preferences lodged by political parties for the 2006 North Eastern General Communal constituency

	Party/candidate lodging preferences									
	UPP (1)	Touakin (2)	FLP (3)	SDL (4)	NAPF (5)	Irwin (6)	NVTLP (7)	NFP (8)	JFP (9)	COIN (10)
Robinson (UPP)	1	4	2	5	5	4	4	5	4	4
Touakin (Ind)	4	1	4	3	3	2	2	3	3	3
Terubea (FLP)	2	6	1	6	4	6	6	6	5	5
Christopher (SDL)	6	5	6	1	6	5	1	4	6	6
Billings (NAPF)	3	3	3	4	1	3	5	1	2	2
Irwin (Ind)	5	2	5	2	2	1	3	2	1	1

Notes: UPP = United Peoples Party; FLP= Fiji Labour Party; SDL = Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua; NAPF = National Alliance Party of Fiji.

third columns. As a result, Irwin leapfrogged ahead of David Christopher at the 5th count and took the seat. Four parties (shown in columns 7–10) lodged preferences for this constituency even though they did not stand a candidate, hoping to use these to trade for better preferences from other parties in other constituencies.

Fiji's AV system is a compulsory system in two senses. First, eligible citizens are required to register and cast a ballot, and may face fines if they do not do so. Second, they are required to rank at least 75 per cent of candidates in order to cast a valid (formal) ballot (either by inserting numbers themselves or by voting 'above-the-line' and thereby endorsing party preferences). Ballots completed by a tick below the line are invalid. Research by the Fiji Elections Office has shown this to be the commonest reason for casting an invalid ballot. In total, 8.7 per cent of ballots were invalid in 1999, 12.1 per cent in 2001 and 9 per cent in 2006.

Notes

- ¹ The full 1998 Electoral Act is available online at http://www.undp.org.fj/elections/Elections/law/electoral_act_1998.htm
- ² General electors are all those who do not fall into the Fijian, the Indo-Fijian or the Rotuman categories. The Rotuman constituency covers all of Fiji.
- ³ The exact share of 'above-the-line' votes is uncertain because the Elections Office has never been able to release the full set of forms which show the detailed records of all votes.

Editors' note

Throughout this book, in accordance with common usage, the term 'the Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill' has been abbreviated to 'the RTU Bill'.

Note also that, throughout this book, different authors use different terms to describe those descended from the Indian subcontinent. No attempt has been made to standardize this usage.