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ARTICLE



Gender and candidate selection in a weakly institutionalised party system: the case of Samoa

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ABSTRACT

Women's political representation has historically been low in Samoa, as in much of the Pacific region. Candidate selection is viewed as a crucial factor in women's under-representation globally. This article contends that the lack of formalised party selection processes sets Samoa apart from most other countries studied as part of the literature on gender and candidate selection. Yet, as this article shows, pre-selection processes exist at the village level, where a weak level of institutionalisation in the party system gives an inordinate amount of influence to local male gatekeepers. These processes are gendered, but can advantage female candidates that successfully navigate them. The extent to which these pre-election processes affect results depends largely on informal norms of group consensus within communities. This article looks at these processes in the context of the 2016 Samoan election, the first since a constitutional amendment mandating a minimum level of women's representation in Parliament.

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The processes of candidate selection are a key feature of research on political parties (see Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Hazan and Rahat 2010). Recent feminist institutionalist scholarship has examined these processes through a gendered lens, looking at the formal and informal rules that impact on the success of female aspirants, in various types of party systems (see for example Bjarnegård 2013; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016; Kenny 2013). Yet comparatively little is known about processes of candidate selection that occur outside political party structures.

This article examines gender and candidate selection in the context of Samoa, a small island developing state in the Pacific region, where there is an absence of formalised party selection processes. Samoa is a noteworthy case in that while at first glance it appears to have a strong party system – albeit with one party, the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), dominating politics for the past 30 years – closer examination shows the party system to be weakly institutionalised. Low levels of institutionalisation may on the one hand disadvantage women in that a lack of formalised rules to prevent discrimination may impede their political progress; weakly institutionalised party systems can also, however, create space for women's activists to agitate for change in the absence of rigid party structures (see Caul 1999). In this article, I use the case study of Alataua Sisi

constituency in Samoa to examine how gender impacts on candidate selection processes at the local level in a weakly institutionalised party system. I show that a low level of institutionalisation in the party system gives an inordinate amount of influence to local gatekeepers (who are almost always men); while these local-level selection processes are gendered, they can advantage individual women who are able to successfully navigate them. I argue that this aspect of the party system has been encouraged by the HRPP in order to maintain its dominance.

As in many other Pacific states (see Baker 2017; Zetlin 2014), women have been continuously under-represented in the Samoan Parliament since independence in 1962. Up to the 2016 election, only 14 women had ever served in the Samoan Parliament,¹ and half had served one term or less. After the 2011 election, in which the number of women elected dropped from four to two, Samoan Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi announced the government's intention to introduce a parliamentary gender quota before the next general election. In June 2013, a constitutional amendment was passed by Parliament guaranteeing a minimum level of women's representation at five MPs, or around ten per cent of parliamentary seats. The quota adopted was a 'safety net' system, in which additional seats are created for women should fewer than five be elected in any general election, to be occupied by the highest-polling (percentage-wise) unsuccessful female candidates (Baker 2014). The 2016 election, which is the focus of this article, was the first in which this constitutional amendment was applied. The article is in five parts: the following section will discuss the theoretical framework, methodology and case selection; the second section will look at the Samoan political context; the third section will examine gender in the 2016 election; the fourth section will focus on a case study of candidate selection in one constituency; and the final section will conclude with analysis on how gendered norms and rules impact on candidate selection in Samoa, and the lessons contained for the study of weakly institutionalised party systems more broadly.

Theoretical framework and case selection

This article uses a feminist institutionalist framework to examine the gendered nature of candidate selection in Samoa. Feminist institutionalism takes the focus on institutions as a central aspect of political analysis from new institutionalism, but applies a gender lens, examining how institutions are gendered and the impact this has on female political actors and gender relations (see Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). Scholars have used feminist institutionalism to examine how different types of gendered institutions influence processes of candidate selection, predominantly occupied with those that occur within political parties (Franceschet 2005; Hinojosa 2012; Piscopo 2016). It is purported to be an integral part of research into parties: 'Candidate selection is at the core of what political parties stand for and what they do' (Kenny and Verge 2016, 353). Very little, however, is written about candidate selection in contexts where party officials and members are not the primary gatekeepers.

Samoa presents an interesting case study in the field of gender and candidate selection due to its history of poor women's representation and recent adoption of a gender quota; its political party system; and its relatively unusual candidate selection processes. While small states are often overlooked in mainstream political science, the study of small polities

can contribute significantly to our understanding of democratic politics more broadly (Veenendaal and Corbett 2015). In the case of Samoa, while it has unique political institutions based on elements of the traditional *fa'amatai* system, it can provide insight into the gendered nature of candidate selection in weakly institutionalised party systems elsewhere in the world.

The first Samoan political party, the HRPP, was established in 1979. Barring a short period in opposition in 1986–87, the HRPP has held power since 1982. Historically, its main opposition has been the Samoa National Development Party and its successors, the Samoa Democratic United Party and Tautua Samoa (now the Tautua Party). Samoa is often cited as unusual in the region for the relative strength of its party system (see Fraenkel 2005), yet the extent to which it meets the various definitions of a party system is debatable. Sartori's (1976) definition entailed at least two parties, and a degree of ideological polarisation. While two parties contested the 2016 Samoan elections, one party won 94 per cent of the seats, leaving the country without a recognised parliamentary opposition.² Furthermore, there is no obvious ideological cleavage in Samoan politics, as evident by the party-hopping that often takes place; in 2016, one of the founders of the Tautua Party changed allegiances to contest as an HRPP candidate, retaining his seat (Sanerivi 2016).

A third key feature in evaluating party systems is the level of institutionalisation (Huntington 2006; Mainwaring and Scully 1995). A highly institutionalised party system is one in which there is relative stability in the levels of support for major parties; voters closely identify with certain political parties; parties are well-resourced and considered vital for democratic legitimacy; and the fortunes of parties do not rise and fall completely on the tenure of individual leaders. Conversely, weakly institutionalised party systems are electorally volatile, with voters tending to support individuals regardless of party affiliation; where parties are not considered a necessary component of democracy and sometimes not given a formal status in the political system; and where parties generally act solely as vehicles for political leaders to assert their leadership ambitions (Mainwaring 1998; Mainwaring and Scully 1995).

Samoa does not fit exactly into either definition, although party institutionalisation is a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006). While electoral support for the HRPP has remained relatively stable since the late 1980s, with the party regularly winning two-thirds parliamentary majorities in elections, some of its individual MPs have not fared as well. There was around 50 per cent turnover in both the 2011 and the 2016 elections, with HRPP casualties including numerous prominent cabinet ministers on both occasions. This reflects the fact that voting is highly individualised and often based on village or family connections (Haley et al. 2017). Scholars have argued that Samoan parties, as elsewhere in the Pacific region, tend to be formed around popular individuals and act as a platform for their political leadership ambitions (Morgan 2005; So'o and Fraenkel 2005); yet while the HRPP has had very limited leadership turnover, it has changed leaders without a significant drop in support (Corbett and Ng Shiu 2014).

It is the contention of this article that Samoa represents something of a paradox; while appearing relatively well-institutionalised, the Samoan party system is in fact weakly institutionalised. This is clear from the HRPP's candidate selection processes. Well-institutionalised parties tend to have more regulated practices for candidate selection, while weakly institutionalised parties will rely more on informal processes (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Waylen 2003).

The HRPP does not conduct pre-selection processes prior to elections. The party does, however, have a policy of not officially endorsing any challengers in a constituency where there is a sitting HRPP member (So'o 2012; Tuimaleali'ifano 2001). Candidates who are challenging an incumbent HRPP MP can affiliate themselves to the party without being officially endorsed, meaning that although they are registered with the Electoral Commission as independents they do appear on HRPP posters listing the party candidates. When Tuilaepa was questioned about this practice prior to the 2016 election, he described incumbents as 'passengers with first class tickets while the other candidates hold business class seats' (Tupufia 2016b). In the 2016 election, there were over 2.5 times as many HRPP candidates as there were constituencies. Fourteen constituencies were only contested by HRPP or HRPP-aligned candidates, in addition to four constituencies in which HRPP incumbents were running uncontested, meaning the party was guaranteed at least 18 seats out of 49 before the election took place. While the HRPP may dominate Samoan politics, its lack of candidate selection processes means that significant power in terms of the individuals elected resides at the local level.

The prevalence of informal norms rather than formal written rules in candidate selection make it a potentially difficult area of study. Candidate selection has been described as 'the secret garden of politics' (Gallagher and Marsh 1988). The study of informal norms can require ethnographic methods (Waylen 2014); recent studies on candidate selection have relied extensively on interviews with key actors involved in the process (see Hinojosa 2012; Kenny 2013). The research in this article was carried out as part of the author's participation in the 2016 Samoan Election Domestic Observation Project, led by academics from the Australian National University and the National University of Samoa (see Haley et al. 2017). The research design of the observation project incorporated principles of political ethnography, including an expanded period of observation before and after polling day. As an election observer I had access to key political actors in the constituency, but as a non-Samoan political scientist I was very much an 'outsider'. I had no access to the village council meetings in which the candidate endorsement processes I will discuss took place, and so this research draws heavily on accounts of the process given by those involved in semi-structured interviews that took place in the constituency prior to election day, with political aspirants, members of the village council, and the *pulenu'u* (village representatives) and *sui tama'ita'i* (village women's representatives).

This article will use as a case study the candidate selection process in one constituency, Alataua Sisifo, in which gendered dynamics of candidate selection in the 2016 election were particularly pronounced. Prior to 2016, no female candidates had ever contested the Alataua Sisifo seat. In 2016 it was contested by the incumbent MP and five other candidates, three of whom were women. With six candidates, Alataua Sisifo had the equal-most number of candidates contesting of any Samoan constituency; the equal-most number of female candidates; the highest vote share for female candidates; and the sole new female MP to be elected outright.

Politics, custom and gender in Samoa

Samoan culture is based around the *fa'amatai* system, under which the extended family unit is led by a *matai*, a family member who has been chosen by consensus. The 'fit' between local cultural context and democratic institutions is at the heart of debates

around the relevance and application of democracy in the Pacific (see Larmour 1994). The efforts of the authors of the Samoan constitution to reconcile these two elements led to the adoption of a unique electoral system that draws heavily on the principles of *fa'amatai* within a Westminster-influenced parliamentary system (So'o 2009). Initially, only *matai* could vote; universal suffrage was introduced in 1990, but eligibility to stand for Parliament is still restricted to *matai*. This restricts the pool of potential political aspirants significantly, especially in terms of gender; only around one in ten *matai* are women.

Even as the national political system has evolved with the introduction of universal suffrage and the emergence of a political party system, the *fa'amatai* system still has political dominance at the local government level. This is through the primacy of the village council (*fono*), the governance body on which resident *matai* sit. The *fono* is empowered to make decisions for the village and to deal out punishments for misconduct; this can go as far as removing from a family the right for the *matai* to sit on the *fono*, or in some cases outright banishment from the village, which may include destroying property (Tuimaleali'ifano 2001).

Traditionally, *matai* titles were 'conferred on chosen individuals who then represent the family in public life' as decision-makers on the *fono* (Tuimaleali'ifano 2006, 364), as well as other bodies such as church committees (Meleisea et al. 2015); the meaning of titles, however, has changed somewhat over time. The rapid increase in the number of *matai* titles in the second half of the twentieth century was often attributed to *matai*-only voting rights, but there were other reasons for this proliferation. Titles were split to allow them to be divided among multiple young men in the family who might otherwise be aggrieved to remain untitled; to maintain connections with family who migrated to New Zealand or Australia; as a method to end disputes within a village; or to recognise educational or professional achievements (Sapolu et al. 2012; So'o and Fraenkel 2005). None of these justifications for title bestowal necessarily entailed serving the village through becoming a *fono* member. Thus while local government is still considered to be the most visible, and potentially the most important, level of political governance (Tuimaleali'ifano 2006), in practice not all *matai* are required or even expected to participate in it.

There are some villages that do not allow women to hold *matai* titles; others allow female *matai* but prevent them from sitting on the *fono* (see Meleisea et al. 2015). Even where women have unrestricted access to titles in theory, they will often cede their right to a title to their brothers or other male relatives (Vaa et al. 2006). Those who do hold titles overwhelmingly choose not to sit on the *fono*, which is considered to be a 'male domain' (So'o 2012, 71). The associated female domain is service on the village women's committee, the main role of which is promotion of public health and hygiene (Vaa et al. 2006).

While women are under-represented as *matai*, there are still 1,766 female *matai* in Samoa according to 2011 figures, who collectively hold almost 4,000 titles.³ For many the provision of a *matai* title, and especially a high-ranking title, supersedes many gendered barriers to public life; rank and status are often seen as more important than gender in Samoan life (Corbett and Liki 2015). It should also be noted that many women *matai* do not wish to enter formal politics, for a variety of reasons (see Spark and Corbett 2016). Yet for those that do, there are enduring obstacles. Most female *matai* live in urban areas; only around five per cent of village-based *matai* are women

(Meleisea et al. 2015). In village council matters non-resident *matai* ‘usually give deference’ to residents of the village (So’o and Fraenkel 2005, 345). The participation of women in local government structures is therefore severely restricted.

At the village level, there are institutionalised selection practices that operate outside the party context. In the absence of party pre-selection mechanisms, processes take place within villages to endorse favoured candidates. The gatekeepers in this context are the members – and especially the senior members – of the village *fono*. Once a candidate has negotiated family-level politics and gained the support of their extended family, approaching the village *fono* for support for an electoral run is considered the most important step in preparing to contest (Tuimaleali’ifano 2001; see also Meleisea et al. 2015; So’o 2012). For a village – or even a constituency as a whole – to agree on one candidate is perceived by some to be the ideal electoral scenario, a choice based on traditional consensus-based decision-making rather than elections which are seen as more combative (see Va’a 1983). Yet it can be argued that ‘consensus-based decision-making gives greater weight to the views of those at the helm of the village hierarchy’ (So’o and Fraenkel 2005, 337). If the *fono* decides to endorse a candidate, in some cases there are repercussions for individuals or families for not abiding by this decision, including potential banishment from the village (Iati 2013; So’o and Fraenkel 2005). In pre-independence politics this decision would often result in all other candidates withdrawing their nominations; while less common, this still happens in modern politics (Iati 2013).

Gender and the 2016 Samoan election

The 2016 Samoan election was the first in which a parliamentary gender quota was implemented (see Baker 2014). It was contested by a record number of women, more than double the number who had contested the previous election in 2011. Overall, 24 female candidates contested, but women still only made up 15 per cent of the total number of candidates.⁴ There were 36 constituencies out of 49 total that had no women contesting (Baker 2016).

As seen in Table 1, HRPP candidates – either endorsed or affiliated – made up over 75 per cent of total candidates, and there was at least one HRPP candidate in every constituency. In 16 constituencies, endorsed HRPP candidates were contesting against each other,⁵ and in a further 23 one endorsed HRPP candidate was contesting against one or more HRPP-aligned candidates. Over 70 per cent (17 out of 24) of female candidates were HRPP-endorsed or -affiliated. Four stood for the Tautua Party, and the remaining three ran as independents. Over half of the women who contested won more than 10 per cent of the vote, and a third won more than 20 per cent (Baker 2016).

Table 1. Candidates in the 2016 Samoan general election.

	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
HRPP endorsed	10	71	81
HRPP affiliated	7	36	43
Tautua endorsed	4	18	22
Independents ^a	3	15	18
TOTAL CANDIDATES	24	140	164

Source: Office of the Samoan Electoral Commissioner (2016); Human Rights Protection Party campaign literature.

^aThis figure includes some independents who were aligned with the Tautua Party; actual numbers are not known.

Ultimately, however, only four women were elected outright in their constituencies. Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa, the longest-serving female MP in the Samoan Parliament, won the seat she has held since 1985 unopposed.⁶ The two other female incumbent MPs, Gato-loaifa'ana Amataga Alesana-Gidlow and Faimalotoa Kika Iemaima Stowers-Ah Kau, were both re-elected. All three were endorsed by the HRPP. A fourth woman, Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tuuau, won the seat of Alataua Sisifo from the incumbent HRPP MP. Ali'imalemanu⁷ ran as an independent but was affiliated to the HRPP.

Since fewer than five women were elected outright, the quota provisions were enacted to bring an additional female member into Parliament. This increased the size of Parliament to 50 seats. The additional seat was taken up by Fa'aulusau Rosa Duffy Stowers, who had contested against the incumbent speaker and won 35.5 per cent of the vote. Fa'aulusau was also an HRPP-affiliated independent.

Case study: Alataua Sisifo constituency

Alataua Sisifo is a small constituency of 1516 registered voters, encompassing three villages. The biggest, Neiafu, has a larger population than the two smaller, Falelima and Tufutafoe, combined (SBS 2011).⁸ The size discrepancy has meant that while in the era of *matai*-only suffrage members could be elected from the smaller villages, since the introduction of universal suffrage all elected MPs have been from Neiafu. Around 13 per cent of the population in Alataua Sisifo hold *matai* titles.

Alataua Sisifo had been won in the 2006 and 2011 elections by Lafaitale Patrick Leia-taulesa, who had most recently been Associate Finance Minister. He had won 65 per cent of the vote in 2011. In 2016, there were six candidates: Lafaitale; Ali'imalemanu, who had resigned her senior position with the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme in Apia to contest the election; Aiolupotea Taatiti Visekota, a lawyer who had previously been a parliamentarian, winning a by-election in 1998 for the seat of A'ana Alofi no. 1 under the title Maiava; Momoemausu Siaifa Uiga, a New Zealand-based businessman; Pei Iefata Reupena Tauiliili, a sociologist and health worker; and Tuifaiga Loluama Yoshida Tuimauluga, a prominent businesswoman who was based in the electorate. Lafaitale ran as an endorsed HRPP candidate, and the three female candidates ran as HRPP-affiliated independents. Pei was a registered Tautua candidate, and Momoemausu was an independent affiliated with Tautua (Keresoma 2016b; pers. comm., March 2016). Both highlighted party policy as a key factor in their choice to support Tautua (pers. comm., March 2016). For the HRPP-affiliated candidates, while one candidate also mentioned personal connections to party leadership and economic policy, there was a prevailing sense of pragmatism about the choice. That the village or constituency was known as an HRPP area was cited by all as a motivating factor to affiliate (pers. comm., March 2016).

Two candidates ran from Tufutafoe: Tuifaiga and Momoemausu. The village council endorsed Tuifaiga as their candidate; one male *matai* said in an interview that it was a difficult decision to endorse a woman, but that no other *matai* had come forward to stand. Momoemausu's intention to run was not known by many until the nomination list had been publicised (pers. comm., February 2016).

In neighbouring Neiafu, the village council made the unprecedented decision to endorse two candidates, Lafaitale and Ali'imalemanu. The endorsement negotiations

were at times tense, with ‘strong language’ used, and one speech comparing Ali’imalemanu challenging Lafaitale to King Solomon’s sons vying for the throne while he was still alive (pers. comm., March 2016). Negotiations were unusually long, with some *matai* pushing strongly for the village to endorse only one candidate as per their custom. In December 2015, the decision was made to endorse two candidates and allow other candidates from the village to also run (pers. comm., March 2016). This statement by a *fono* not restricting candidacy is often couched in human rights-based language, but can be a cover to avoid offending any aspiring candidates while still endorsing a particular candidate (Tuimaleali’ifano 2001). Pei, also from Neiafu, ran without endorsement from the village although he did claim endorsement from his sub-village (pers. comm., March 2016). The sixth candidate, Aiolupotea, had approached Neiafu to run as a candidate but faced some resistance, including being ejected from a village council meeting. Aiolupotea then sought and received the endorsement of Falelima, where she also had a title (pers. comm., March 2016).

The most contested endorsement process in the constituency was in the village of Neiafu, where all successful candidates since the introduction of universal suffrage have come from. Throughout the campaign, there was evidence of the repercussions of this process. In particular, Aiolupotea’s decision to run with endorsement from Falelima, after originally seeking endorsement from Neiafu, was controversial. The week before polling day, Aiolupotea directly addressed the controversy in a ten-minute speech broadcasted on radio and television. The speech was a much discussed aspect of the campaign within the constituency (pers. comm., March 2016). Most of the campaigning that candidates conducted took place at village meetings, which highlights the importance of securing support from village elders.

The 2016 election was a significant milestone for Alataua Sisifo, as the first time any of the three villages had endorsed a female candidate, and the first time Neiafu had endorsed two parliamentary candidates. The question remained, however, as to whether the voting patterns of the villages would reflect the will of the *fono*. While *fono* endorsement is considered to be highly influential, it is not binding and the strength of the *fono* to determine voter behaviour varies from place to place (Meleisea et al. 2015). Interviews with voters leading up to polling day suggested that faith in village consensus was strong, although voters in Falelima and Tufutafoe expressed doubt that their voting blocs would be large enough to challenge that of Neiafu. The general view seemed to be that in the absence of familial ties to another candidate, members of the village would support the *fono*-endorsed candidate, with the Neiafu vote splitting largely on family lines between Lafaitale and Ali’imalemanu. One unendorsed candidate criticised the village endorsement process, arguing that it was unlawful to restrict the right to stand for election. Another candidate offered a thinly veiled criticism of consensus-based voting traditions, claiming that times were changing and in the election people would claim their right to vote freely and without intimidation (pers. comm., March 2016).

Results by ballot box from the election (see Table 2) illustrate the strength of consensus in each village. In Falelima, Aiolupotea won 67 per cent of the vote, with Ali’imalemanu and Lafaitale a distant second and third. In Tufutafoe, Tuifaiga won the most votes but gained only a plurality. Ali’imalemanu won both polling stations in Neiafu, and the combined vote share of Ali’imalemanu and Lafaitale represented over 80 per cent of votes cast in the village. The results would suggest that village endorsement is significant in terms of

Table 2. Alataua Sisifo results in the 2016 election.

CANDIDATE	Tufutafoe	Neiafu- Uta	Neiafu- Tai	Falelima	Specials – Apia	Specials – Other	TOTAL
ALIIMALEMANU Alofa Tuuau	21	93	81	26	179	32	432
AIOLUPOTEA TAATITI Visekota	33	40	14	104	54	87	332
LAFATELE Patrick Leiataualesa	7	75	67	16	100	15	280
TUIFAIGA Loluama Yoshida Tuimauualuga	61	0	2	2	25	10	100
PEI Iefata Reupena Tauiliili	13	12	5	7	17	8	62
MOMOEMAUSU Siaifa Uiga	5	1	0	1	3	1	11
	140	221	169	156	378	153	1217

Source: Office of the Samoan Electoral Commissioner (pers. comm., 2016).

vote share, but that its significance varies, with village-endorsed candidates picking up four in five votes in Neiafu, but just over two in five votes in Tufutafoe.

The votes cast in the constituency on polling day made up only 56 per cent of total votes, with special votes cast in Apia and in other constituencies making up the rest. The distribution of the special votes matched the distribution of votes in-constituency, with Ali'imalemanu gaining the most votes, Aiolutotea second, and Lafatele third. The final result saw Ali'imalemanu win with 35 per cent of the vote, with the three female candidates picking up a combined vote share of over 70 per cent. Alataua Sisifo had 80.5 per cent turnout, the highest of any constituency in Samoa.

Court challenges can be used to enforce or challenge village-level selection processes (So'o 2012), and have become a prominent feature of both pre- and post-election periods. In 2016 there were petitions filed before the election in nine constituencies challenging the eligibility of candidates, with five candidates being ruled ineligible to stand; following the election, the results in six constituencies were challenged by losing candidates. While no court challenges were lodged prior to the election against Alataua Sisifo candidates, interviews in the constituency revealed that challenges were considered against at least three candidates, all on *monotaga* (service) grounds. These were ultimately not pursued; one candidate stated that they were wary of a backlash from voters if they were to be seen to undermine other candidacies through court action (pers. comm., March 2016).

After a divisive endorsement process, the Neiafu *fono* issued a ruling that candidates from Neiafu were not to challenge the result in court if they lost (pers. comm., March 2016). Following the election, however, Lafatele filed a petition alleging that Ali'imalemanu had engaged in bribery and treating during the campaign. Before the case was heard, village *matai* intervened and requested a mediation process, culminating in the case being withdrawn. Neiafu *matai* had publicly pleaded for Lafatele to withdraw the case and deal with the matter in 'the traditional way' rather than through the courts (Tupufia 2016a; see also Keresoma 2016a).

As we can see from the case study of Alataua Sisifo, the *fono*, rather than party officials and officeholders, are the gatekeepers to the political sphere at both local and national level. Thus the *fono*, not the political party, is the key institutional space in which women's access to politics is negotiated. While this sets Samoa apart from many other countries, village councils constitute 'male power monopolies' (see Hinojosa 2012) that dictate candidate selection processes in a similar way to political parties elsewhere.

Candidate selection in a patronage-based system relies on the candidate's relatability to and connections with the selectorate, usually a small group of men. This can disadvantage women who do not have the same access to these networks as their male rivals (Baldez 2004; Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016). Political aspirants can potentially be portrayed as 'outsiders' as a method of delegitimation (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016). In some ways in Samoa the establishment of 'insider' status for a candidate is more formalised, with the requirement that a candidate demonstrate *monotaga*, yet it still requires a positive relationship with the village *fono* and especially with senior *matai*. The candidate nomination form requires a signature from a *fono* representative attesting that the aspirant has demonstrated *monotaga*.

Where women are incumbents, they can benefit from both village norms and the established relationships they have with the *fono*, as well as party rules, including the policy that the HRPP will not officially endorse any of their competitors. While this still means that more than one HRPP candidate could stand in the constituency, all of the three incumbent female MPs in the 2016 election retained their seats, including the most senior female MP who ran unopposed.

The criteria that gatekeepers use to evaluate aspirants is subjective and context-specific (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2008), but for political parties it can include ideological orientation, electoral strategy, and impact on party unity and loyalty (see Murray 2007). For a Samoan village *fono*, important criteria are membership of the *fono*, church activity, level of education and the ranking and status of their title. Family connections are also very important (Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel, and Meleisea 2017). The three incumbent female MPs who were re-elected in 2016 all 'inherited' their seats from close relatives (Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel, and Meleisea 2017; Meleisea et al. 2015). Ali'imalemanu also had a political heritage, with both her uncle and her cousin having held the Alataua Sisifo seat (pers. comm., March 2016).

Support for the participation of women in politics is relatively widespread but far from universal in Samoa. In one village in Alataua Sisifo in particular, senior *matai* expressed their reservations about endorsing a woman as their favoured candidate. Yet all three villages in the constituency did endorse female candidates for the election. In seeking endorsement, the female candidates were advantaged – or at least, not disadvantaged – by the fact that no formal rules existed in any of the villages barring women from holding titles or performing all the functions of *matai*, as in other villages (Meleisea et al. 2015). Still, female *matai* are very much not the norm in Alataua Sisifo; the 2011 census only recorded 14 resident female *matai*, with 217 male *matai* (SBS 2011). One potential advantage for female candidates is that Neiafu and Falelima are two of the few villages in Samoa where the village women's representative attends *fono* meetings (Meleisea et al. 2015). Thus the 'women's sphere of interest' in the village has a specific voice within the local government institutions. Local church institutions can have significant influence at village level and are perceived to be 'informal agents' in village governance (Sasa 2014). Neiafu has the most female deacons of any village in Samoa (Meleisea et al. 2015).

Within the *fono* strictly delineated gender roles endure, even in villages where the number of female *matai* has been steadily increasing over time. This limits the participation of women in the processes of local government which remains predominantly a

men's space. Women can succeed in this arena, however, when they possess the resources to navigate the system, and where institutional barriers to women are less fixed.

In the context of Samoa, with a weakly institutionalised party system, candidate selection is intensely localised and local gatekeepers wield a significant amount of control. While the influence of local gatekeepers is a well-documented aspect of politics in many Pacific countries (Corbett 2015), in the Samoan case it can be seen as a political feature that has been deliberately promoted by the HRPP to help maintain its political dominance. The 1990 Village *Fono* Act was 'a political move' by the HRPP meant as a conciliatory gesture to traditionalists in the wake of the move to universal suffrage (Sapolu et al. 2012; see also Vaa et al. 2006). While universal suffrage threw into doubt the previously 'unquestioned political authority of *matai*' (Lawson 1996, 158), the *Fono* Act entrenched the authority of the *fono*, and therefore *matai*, within village politics. Thus while *fono* control over national-level politics was somewhat reduced, control over the local level was increased. This recognition of the primacy of the *fono* at village level has helped to maintain the HRPP's national-level dominance, as the interaction of traditional and modern forms of governance enhances the legitimacy of the political system (Iati 2013). The political power of the *fono* is enhanced by the HRPP's lack of formalised candidate selection processes, meaning that the powers of candidate selection largely reside at village level. In turn, this helps the HRPP hold onto power, as its parliamentary majority is not risked by the waning popularity of its incumbents; instead, in most constituencies voters have multiple HRPP-endorsed or -affiliated candidates to choose from.

Conclusion

The village is the nucleus of political identity and governance in Samoa. Constituencies are designed to accommodate the traditional political divisions within Samoa, and electoral rolls are linked to villages within the constituency. The village *fono* is not only the local government body for the village, but also acts in a gatekeeping capacity in terms of access to national political office, through the process of endorsing candidates. Fui Asofou So'o (2012, 63) argues: 'Samoa has not adopted party pre-selection ... because local factors are considered more important in elections than party factors.'

This system has gendered outcomes. In a 2015 report, researchers from the National University of Samoa argue that the obstacles to women's participation at village level are the main barrier to women's equal participation in politics: 'women have very little voice in the governance of villages, which are the foundation stones of the national political system' (Meleisea et al. 2015, 16–17). Formal barriers, including restrictions on women's access to *matai* titles or their attendance at village council meetings, can affect women's participation in politics; yet so too can informal barriers, given that the gatekeepers to national-level political participation are often these local government actors, who are predominantly men. While the political system in Samoa is unique in its incorporation of *fa'amatai*, the gendered nature of candidate selection reflects that of many other parts of the world (Piscopo 2016).

In Samoa, as elsewhere, elite women tend to have the greatest chance of selection and election as candidates (see Waylen 2015). This is exacerbated by the informal rules around *matai* titles that tend to reward urban- or overseas-based women for educational and professional accomplishments, rather than village-based women. Yet this is also a

disadvantage for many, as female *matai* generally have no impetus to participate in local government politics in their villages and so lack access to political gatekeepers who can endorse their candidacies should they choose to run for Parliament. To succeed, therefore, Samoan political women must walk a tightrope between cultivating village-based connections and transcending the village-level gender relations that might delegitimise their political aspirations. While some do succeed, they are outliers – usually overseas-educated, politically connected women with high-ranking titles. Observers in the 2016 election noted a general trend of title rank becoming less important in electoral contests – with lower-ranked titleholders winning seats from higher-ranked competitors – yet this does not seem to hold true for female candidates (Haley et al. 2017).

The extent to which processes of candidate selection at the village level affect election results depends in large part on informal norms of group consensus within communities. This can also be gendered; the act of endorsing a woman over a man could delegitimise the process. In one village in Alataua Sisifo, community members criticised the decision to endorse a woman as against cultural practice, although they acknowledged there was no choice as she was the only candidate put forward (pers. comm., February 2016). In that village, the endorsed candidate won just 44 per cent of the vote; in the neighbouring villages, group consensus held stronger with the endorsed candidate (or candidates) collecting 67 per cent and 81 per cent of the vote respectively. While endorsed candidates won their local ballot box count at all four polling stations in the constituency, their level of support did vary, suggesting the influence of candidate endorsement is not consistent across villages.

The institution of a parliamentary gender quota in Samoa has created a minimum level of women's representation of five MPs. Since only four women were elected outright in the 2016 election, an additional female MP was appointed, meaning women make up 10 per cent of the expanded 50-seat Parliament. It has been noted that the 'long-term success of a quota depends on the extent to which it actually alters intra-party power structures by giving increased influence and leadership positions to women' (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016, 470). In the aftermath of the 2016 election, Samoa's longest-serving female MP also became its first female Deputy Prime Minister, a significant milestone in terms of women's representation at the executive level. Yet in the case of Samoa, the position most strengthened by recent developments is that occupied by women who hold high-ranking titles and are well-connected to traditional based of power. In general, women still have limited access to gatekeeping positions on the village council, which is a critical space of candidate selection in the Samoan political system.

The findings of this study echo Waylen's (2000: 791) argument that the 'absence of institutionalisation allows for the dominance of elites, patrimonialism and clientelism that may favour individual women, but does not generally facilitate a long-term increase in the total number of women active in conventional politics.' Weakly institutionalised systems can also provide opportunity for women. The concept of 'nested newness' (see Chappell 2011; Mackay 2014) – that institutional reforms are layered onto existing institutions, the rules and norms of which can constrain or subvert their aims – is less of an issue in a more loosely institutionalised setting. While institutions can prove difficult to adapt or change (Mackay 2014), weakly institutionalised processes can prove more amenable. Yet the less formalised nature of candidate selection in Samoa is, of course, subject to its own rules and norms at the local level, and based on the 2016 election, is

still highly gendered. Research on candidate selection in weakly institutionalised party systems may need to look beyond party structures to understand the power dynamics at play.

Notes

1. A further three women won elections or by-elections but then lost their seats through electoral petitions.
2. According to standing orders, a party needs eight MPs to be officially recognised in Parliament; the Tautua Party only won three seats. There is now what the Prime Minister refers to as an ‘internal opposition’, made up of HRPP MPs who do not hold ministerial or associate ministerial portfolios (Malielegaoi and Swain 2017, 223).
3. Sources: Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, Apia, pers. comm., 2012; Land and Titles Court, Apia, pers. comm., 2012.
4. It should be noted that only around 10 per cent of *matai* are women, so given the pool of eligible candidates, women were in fact over-represented in 2016 candidate numbers (Haley et al. 2017).
5. This was usually either because there was no incumbent contesting or a Tautua Party incumbent was contesting.
6. One male aspiring candidate nominated in Lotofaga, the seat held by Fiame, but his candidacy was challenged due to an undisclosed criminal conviction, and he was ruled ineligible.
7. In Samoan culture, when a *matai* title is bestowed that person then uses the title before their first name. If a *matai* holds multiple titles, they are all placed before the first name with no set convention with regards to the order of the titles. Referring to a *matai* by their title is a mark of respect and in formal writing *matai* are usually referred to by their title rather than their last name. I have followed this convention in this article.
8. Neiafu is divided into the sub-villages of Neiafu-Tai and Neiafu-Uta.

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