

The Failure of the Alternative Vote as a Tool for Ethnic Moderation in Fiji

A Rejoinder to Horowitz

Jon Fraenkel

University of the South Pacific, Fiji

Bernard Grofman

University of California, Irvine

In Donald Horowitz's rejoinder to Fraenkel and Grofman, he retreats from his previous claims about the desirability of alternative vote (AV), mischaracterizes our formal results, and nowhere addresses the extreme disproportionality of electoral outcomes in Fiji except to incorrectly dismiss this as due largely to malapportionment. Although he refuses to recognize the role AV played in the build-up to the overthrow of the Indian-led government in May 2000, Horowitz does acknowledge that the system he so strongly urged on Fiji's reformers failed to achieve its intended objectives at the elections of August 2001.

Keywords: alternative vote; Fiji; electoral engineering; strategic voting

The alternative vote (AV) has not succeeded in promoting interethnic cooperation in Fiji. In 1999, the Fiji Labor Party (FLP) secured an absolute majority based largely on Indian votes and Fijian party official-controlled preference transfers, but it had been overthrown by Fijian extremists within a year. In 2001, a Fijian-dominated government was elected, which included supporters of the 2000 coup but left all Indian members of parliament (MPs) on the opposition benches. As we have shown (Fraenkel & Grofman, 2006 [this issue]), moderates fared poorly at both elections. Horowitz responds by downplaying his previous claims about the moderation-inducing effects of AV, mischaracterizing our model of Fiji party space, and blaming the failures of AV on everything but the operation of AV itself. And nowhere does he contest our findings about the lack of proportionality

in the AV results in Fiji. In this rebuttal, restrictions on space lead us to focus only on several misleading parts of Horowitz's (2006 [this issue]) discussion of what he calls "the Fiji experiment."¹

The 1997 constitution was essentially a compact between Indian and Fijian political leaders, which came unstuck because its key architects failed to secure popular backing for their new alliance.² The *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) and National Federation Party (NFP) would have been defeated under any electoral system, but the scale of their defeat was strongly influenced by the new voting laws. Usage of AV substantially magnified the FLP's 1999 victory—with 32% of the first-preference vote, it obtained 52% of parliamentary seats. Fijian party preferences gave the FLP 13 seats of its 37 seats. Under a proportional system, the FLP would not have had an absolute majority. The most likely outcome would have been an FLP-led coalition government with Fijian allied parties holding the balance of power, and a multi-ethnic opposition. Indigenous Fijian hostility to an Indian-led government would have been less likely to become the stock in trade of opposition politics.

The FLP saw itself as a champion of the Indian cane farmer and the urban working classes, and arch opponent of "corrupt" and "inefficient" Fijian-dominated government.³ It strategically allied itself with any opponent of the government, whether like-minded or not (it is Horowitz, not us, who requires that this type of "strategy takes a holiday"). The FLP might instead have forged a coalition after the 1999 polls with the plurality Fijian party (the SVT), which counted among its parliamentarians those indigenous former ministers who had facilitated the passage of the 1997 constitution. But this

1. A longer version of this article, including responses to Horowitz's more general points about interethnic transfers of preferences, strategic voting, and evidence regarding promoderation impacts of alternative vote (AV) from elsewhere in the world, is available from the authors.

2. Horowitz's depiction of Fiji's party space is grossly inaccurate. Fiji Labor Party (FLP) leader Mahendra Chaudhry is cast as the "main Indian conciliator," Rabuka's *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) as a party driven by "anti-Indian inclinations," and the National Federation Party (NFP) as the coup leader's "Indian collaborator." There can be no doubt that SVT ministers, and most of all Rabuka, were the key Fijian movers of the new constitution. For a theorist of interethnic conciliation to downplay the political importance of including these Fijian leaders in the initial postelection government is frankly irresponsible.

3. We do not depict the FLP, as Horowitz suggests, as an "extremist Indian party" but rather locate it at the radical end of the Fijian-Indian ethnic axis while emphasizing the need for a two-dimensional model of Fiji party space precisely to accurately situate the FLP.

would have been to follow the Lijphartian power-sharing provisions rather than Horowitzian electoral incentives. The FLP's class-based interpretation of the political situation left it poorly equipped to recognize the necessity of a more robust alliance with mainstream Fijian leaders to bed down the new constitution. As a result, the government proved inflexible in responding to mounting Fijian concern and oblivious to the security threat. MPs and rank-and-file members of the Fijian political parties ostensibly allied to the FLP-backed coup that occurred in May 2000. Not one of the Fijian ministers in Chaudhry's cabinet proved able to secure election, drawing on Fijian votes, at the 2001 polls.

Horowitz acknowledges that the 2001 polls provide no support for his theory. He seeks to explain this by the disappearance of "subethnic frictions reflected in party politics," arguing that this violated a key precondition for AV to favor moderation. Yet a critical part of his earlier case was that multiple political parties would be sustained by the electoral system itself; "AV can provide quite enough proportionality for the requisite party proliferation" (Horowitz, 1991, p. 191).⁴ Horowitz claims that the 2001 polls were accompanied by an "extraordinary display of Fijian unity" because the Great Council of Chiefs and Methodist Church backed a single party.⁵ This shows a poor grasp of Fiji's political history. Monolithic ethnic parties representing Fijians and Indians were the norm at most elections held from 1966 to 1987.⁶ It was under the 1990 constitution, when all constituencies were communal, that greater competition emerged between parties associated with each group. The 1999 election provided a unique opportunity for progress in Fiji, but it was one that went unfulfilled largely because of the adoption of an inappropriate electoral system. And the problems were made worse, not ameliorated, in the next election under AV.

4. This claim of proportional outcomes under AV has rightly been called the Achilles heel of Horowitz's theory (Lijphart 1997, p. 12). Both the 1999 and 2001 elections saw an extraordinary degree of disproportionality, 19.3% and 15.8%, respectively, as measured by Gallagher's well-known index.

5. In fact, the Great Council of Chiefs, which had previously backed the SVT, declared shortly before the 2001 polls that it would not back any political party while Methodist Church leaders blessed both the Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) and Conservative Alliance-Matanitu Vanua (CAMV).

6. With the exception of the two elections held in 1977 when first the Fijians and then the Indians were deeply split.

References

- Fraenkel, J. & Grofman, B. (2006). Does the alternative vote foster moderation in ethnically divided societies? The case of Fiji. *Comparative Political Studies*, 39(5), 623-651.
- Horowitz, D. L. (1991). *A democratic South Africa? Constitutional engineering in a divided society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Horowitz, D. L. (2006). Strategy takes a holiday: Fraenkel and Grofman on the alternative vote. *Comparative Political Studies*, 39(5), 652-662.
- Lijphart, A. (1997). Disproportionality under alternative voting: The crucial—and puzzling—case of the Australian Senate elections, 1919-1946. *Acta Politica*, 32(1), 9-24.