



# THE ABSENT VOTERS OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Challenges and Prospects for the Enfranchisement of Migrants



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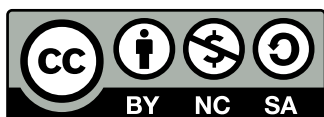
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# Abbreviations

**EMB** Electoral management body

**OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**PIANZEA** Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand Electoral Administrators Network



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Migration, whether seasonal, circular or permanent, has always been central to life in the Pacific Islands. Economic opportunity, labour mobility schemes, environmental pressures and climate-induced displacement have driven large-scale movements, creating transnational communities with enduring political, cultural and economic ties to their countries of origin. This context presents a pressing democratic challenge: how to ensure the meaningful enfranchisement of absent voters.

Electoral arrangements across the region exhibit significant variations. Some countries, such as the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea and Fiji, have provisions for postal or proxy voting. Others, most notably Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu, offer no mechanisms for overseas or even out-of-constituency voting. Referendum processes in Bougainville (in 2019) and Vanuatu (in 2024) have demonstrated the potential for inclusive innovation, with provisions for overseas polling stations and postal ballots that allow migrant participation in historic national decisions. However, such examples are the exception rather than the rule.

Barriers to reform are manifold. Legal frameworks create procedural hurdles, particularly where constitutional provisions restrict change. Electoral management bodies are frequently under-resourced, operating within short funding cycles that limit long-term institutional strengthening. Expanding participation carries risks to electoral integrity, from threats to ballot secrecy to impersonation or manipulation through proxy arrangements. Financial constraints are acute, given the high per-voter costs already characteristic of elections in the Pacific. Political disincentives also weigh heavily: in countries where overseas citizens outnumber domestic voters,

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incumbents might perceive expanded voting rights as a challenge to their electoral prospects.

Despite these challenges, the report identifies pathways for reform. A first stage would involve building a coalition for change that is grounded in political will, broad public engagement and co-design with diaspora communities. A second stage is related to the creation of an enabling environment through shared regional frameworks, strengthened cooperation via the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand Electoral Administrators<sup>1</sup> (PIANZEA) Network, targeted support from development partners and the cautious integration of digital solutions to extend accessibility. Incremental experimentation, such as piloting new voting modalities in limited settings, can build institutional capacity while maintaining trust.

The enfranchisement of absent voters in the Pacific Islands is best understood as part of a broader process of strengthening democratic resilience. Policy approaches will need to balance inclusivity with feasibility, ensuring that participation mechanisms are legally sound, operationally workable and socially legitimate. Reforms are likely to differ across contexts but opportunities for regional cooperation could help to reduce costs and spread institutional learning. When electoral access is considered alongside mobility, climate adaptation and digital governance agendas, it has the potential to foster participatory systems that are both contextually relevant and sustainable. In this way, extending the franchise to absent citizens becomes not only a question of rights, but also a pathway to reinforcing trust, legitimacy and the representative character of Pacific democracies.

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1 The PIANZEA Network, established in 1997, brings together electoral management bodies from across the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand. It serves as a forum for peer exchange, capacity building and regional cooperation on election management and integrity.

# INTRODUCTION

The Pacific Islands has always been a region shaped and profoundly influenced by migration and mobility. In recent years, this has increased in intensity as Pacific Islanders migrate both internally and overseas due to a range of factors such as economic opportunities, climate change and natural disasters, and the desire for better access to services. There can be little doubt that transnational Pacific communities maintain strong links with their home areas and homelands, as well as a strong interest in national and local politics.

Absentee voting rights, however, are a contested subject, particularly in parts of the Pacific where overseas communities numerically outnumber local residents. The environment for absentee voting in the Pacific is complex. Some electoral management bodies (EMBs) are actively looking to facilitate the electoral participation of migrant communities while others are unable to offer even out-of-constituency voting opportunities. Key challenges include electoral management capacity, financial constraints, lack of political will and a lack of consensus about how to enfranchise absent voters or how to define eligibility to vote.

As migration—both temporary and permanent—continues to grow, calls to extend voting rights can be expected to intensify (see Ng Shiu and Bailey 2022). This is especially true in contexts where voter turnout is stagnating or declining, and attention needs to be paid to engaging more citizens in electoral processes. This regional report explores the challenges of and prospects for developing electoral processes that are inclusive of migrant communities in the Pacific

region.<sup>2</sup> It finds that, across the region, the enfranchisement of absent voters is an inherently complicated but important goal. It lays out a pathway for reform: internally, by building a coalition for change that involves political commitment, public engagement, co-design processes, adequate resourcing and phased experimentation; and externally, through support for reform and operationalization that would include regional dialogue on principles, investment in regional networks, development partner support for implementation and the potential leveraging of regional digital governance.

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2 In this report, the Pacific Islands region is defined as the 22 states and territories that make up the Pacific Community (American Samoa, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna), excluding the development partner members (Australia, France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States). For the purposes of reviewing absentee voting rights, there will be a specific focus on independent states (Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) and the two self-governing countries in free association with New Zealand (Cook Islands and Niue).

## Chapter 1

# MIGRATION IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS: CONTEXT AND CHARACTERISTICS

The history of our Blue Pacific Continent is a story of mobility. Over thousands of years, our people have moved within and beyond the region in response to changing environmental, economic, political and social conditions. Our connection to land and ocean is deep and immutable and represents the foundations of our Pacific identity and well-being.

(Pacific Islands Forum 2023: 1)

Throughout its human history, the Pacific Islands has been a region of migration. In the precolonial era, strong voyaging traditions meant Pacific Islanders travelled widely, creating new settlements and establishing trading, diplomatic and familial relationships. Contrary to early theories, it is now known that this migration was purposeful and multidirectional (see Campbell 1996).

In the colonial era, migration was driven by seafaring, the plantation labour trade (involving a mix of voluntary and coerced movement) and missionary work (see Banivanua Mar 2015). In the postcolonial era, migration has continued through a process of what Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) refers to as 'world enlargement'. Enduring ties to colonial powers shaped migration pathways for some, through citizenship or preferential access to labour markets (see Table 1.1). More recently, labour mobility schemes have grown in scale and scope, providing Pacific workers with short- and medium-term migration opportunities in Australia and New Zealand. Such temporary migration pathways have created a new subset of voters for Pacific countries, many of whom are not currently served by existing absentee voting arrangements.

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**Temporary migration pathways have created a new subset of voters for Pacific countries, many of whom are not currently served by existing absentee voting arrangements.**

**Table 1.1. Key international migration pathways for Pacific countries**

Destination country	Scheme	Description	Sending countries
Australia	Falepili Union	Special visa arrangements (280 visas in the first year of the programme) that allow rights of permanent residency	Tuvalu
Australia	Pacific Engagement Visa	Permanent residence ballot system with up to 3,000 places per year (inclusive of partners and dependant children) with job offer requirement	Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu
New Zealand	Free association arrangements	Full New Zealand citizenship rights accorded by free association arrangements	Cook Islands, Niue
New Zealand	Pacific access category	Right to establish residence through a ballot system (currently up to 1,300 places per year) for applicants with a job offer	Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu, Kiribati
New Zealand	Samoa quota scheme	Permanent residence ballot system with up to 1,100 places per year	Samoa
United States	Free association arrangements	The right to live and work indefinitely accorded by Compact agreements (renegotiated on a regular basis)	Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands

Source: Author's research.

Oceania<sup>3</sup> (including Australia and New Zealand) has consistently been the world region with the largest proportion of international migrants (IOM 2000, 2024) relative to total population. In 2020, there were more than 400,000 Pacific-born migrants living in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Migration patterns, however, are starkly uneven across the region. Tonga has one of the highest emigration rates in the world. There were more Tongan-born people living in OECD countries in 2020 than

<sup>3</sup> Oceania refers to the wider region encompassing Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands. The term Pacific Islands is generally used to denote the island countries and territories of Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia.

living in Tonga. Papua New Guinea, by contrast, has one of the lowest emigration rates in the world (Doan et al. 2023).

In small island states, migration has come to be seen as a part of life for families, and by governments as a form of development through capacity building and income generation (Connell and Corbett 2016). This strategy relies on the maintenance of strong connections between migrant and home communities. In the Pacific context, this has been described as ‘transnational corporations of kin’ (Bertram and Watters 1985), where relationships are maintained through the exchange of remittances. Importantly, however, remittances are not purely economic—there are social and political dimensions to these forms of exchange.

Circular patterns of migration are also an important feature of human mobility in the region, where movement is ‘both multidimensional and multidirectional’ (Barcham, Scheyvens and Overton 2009: 323). In this way, Pacific individuals, families and communities based overseas are more accurately defined as transnational rather than diasporic, in that the migration is neither exclusively one-way nor necessarily permanent (Ng Shiu and Bailey 2022). In the context of transnationalism, it is not only people and income, but also ideas and norms that are being exchanged (see Spoonley, Bedford and Macpherson 2003). Connections to home nations and communities are strengthened by dual citizenship provisions, which are now the norm for most countries in the region (see Table 1.2).

Transnational communities play important and at times highly influential roles in the domestic politics of Pacific states (Connell and Corbett 2016). The pro-democracy movement in Tonga has been strongly supported by Tongans based overseas fundraising for legal costs, raising awareness in international forums and producing print and online media (Chappell 1999; Lee 2004). Overseas Samoans have long supported political campaigns in their home country both financially and in other ways, such as Facebook and YouTube engagement in more recent elections (Chappell 1999; Spark et al. 2025). In contrast to this high level of political engagement from overseas communities, however, their rights to participate as voters are constrained; to date, there are no provisions for overseas voting by Tongan or Samoan citizens (see Box 1.1).

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**Circular patterns of migration are also an important feature of human mobility in the region.**

**Table 1.2. Dual citizenship provisions (August 2025)**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Dual citizenship allowed</b>	<b>Year established</b>
<b>Cook Islands</b>	Yes (under New Zealand law)	1978
<b>Federated States of Micronesia</b>	Yes	2023
<b>Fiji</b>	Yes	2009
<b>Kiribati</b>	Yes (only for people of i-Kiribati descent)	1979
<b>Marshall Islands</b>	No (exceptions for children and persons prevented by the law of a foreign country from renouncing foreign citizenship)	N/A
<b>Nauru</b>	Yes	2005 (since 1968 for Nauruan women married to foreign citizens, and since 1997 for incoming naturalized citizens)
<b>Niue</b>	Yes (under New Zealand law)	1978
<b>Palau</b>	Yes	2008
<b>Papua New Guinea</b>	Yes (with Australia, Fiji, Germany, New Zealand, Samoa, the United Kingdom, the United States and Vanuatu)	2014
<b>Samoa</b>	Yes	2004
<b>Solomon Islands</b>	Yes	2018
<b>Tonga</b>	Yes	2007
<b>Tuvalu</b>	Yes	2009
<b>Vanuatu</b>	Yes	2013

Source: Dziedzic, A., *Comparative Regional Report on Citizenship Law: Oceania* (Fiesole: European University Institute, 2020).

### Box 1.1. Overseas voting in Samoa

Samoa has a large community of citizens living overseas. As of 2020, more than 46 per cent of Samoans were based abroad in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (Doan et al. 2023). Despite this—or maybe because of it, due to the potential political influence of such a large overseas population—Samoa does not have a history of facilitating overseas voting.

In 2021, the long-serving Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) government—which had been in power, barring a brief period in opposition in 1986–1987, since 1982—narrowly lost the election to the newly formed FAST Party. Samoans living overseas were an active and vocal support base for FAST, contributing significant financial support to their campaign and often actively encouraging their relatives in Samoa to support the party. In return, a key policy in FAST's election manifesto was the introduction of overseas voting (see Spark et al. 2025).

In 2025, Samoa's parliament was dissolved early after the government failed to pass its budget and a snap election was called for 29 August. The planned amendment to the Electoral Act 2019 that would have enabled overseas voting was not passed before the dissolution, so electors must return to Samoa to cast their vote. For the 2025 elections, there were provisions to register to vote online, including from overseas. As of 12 June 2025, the Samoan Office of the Electoral Commissioner reported that 147 online registrations had been received from citizens based in 14 countries, but that these made up just 5 per cent of total online registrations. Only 10 overseas applications had been fully completed, less than 0.5 per cent of total completed online registrations (Tinetal-Fiavaai 2025). This was probably due to the fact that biometric capture was required to complete registration, and as of 2025 this could only be done in Samoa. The snap election had curtailed plans to facilitate biometric capture from overseas.

## Chapter 2

# DRIVERS OF MIGRATION WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

A range of often intersecting factors drive migration within and outside the Pacific Islands states.

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**Short-term labour mobility schemes have had a substantial impact on migration flows in the region, institutionalizing patterns of temporary labour migration.**

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### 2.1. ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Economic factors are often a primary motive for migration. Many Pacific Islanders move overseas for tertiary education or vocational training opportunities (Ng Shiu and Bailey 2022), which can be a gateway for further migration. Remittances are a key economic driver and source of personal and national income in the region. In 2022, remittances made up half of Tonga's gross domestic product, the highest proportion in the world (World Bank 2023). Short-term labour mobility schemes have had a substantial impact on migration flows in the region, institutionalizing patterns of temporary labour migration.

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### 2.2. LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Pacific states often face immense financial, logistical and political challenges in delivering services to their geographically dispersed populations (Barbara 2019; Duncan and Banga 2018; Laking 2011). High rates of population growth in some of the region's countries add demographic pressures. The high cost of extending health and education services, transport and communications across multiple islands, combined with limited fiscal resources and climate-related shocks, strains state capacity. Rapid population growth further intensifies these pressures, widening the gap between government provision and community needs.

### Box 2.1. Labour mobility in the Pacific

Labour mobility schemes have increasingly become a driver of migration across the Pacific Islands region. New Zealand established the Recognized Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in 2007, growing it from an initial cap of 5,000 workers to more than 20,000 in 2024–2025. Under the RSE scheme, workers can stay in New Zealand for up to seven months at a time (extended to nine for Tuvaluan and i-Kiribati workers given the additional challenges in terms of transport links). In 2008, Australia began piloting a similar programme, which became the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) in 2012. In 2018, the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) was introduced, allowing for up to three years of work in regional and rural Australia across a range of industries. The SWP and PLS were consolidated in 2022 to streamline these visas under the new Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. PALM offers both short-term (up to nine months) and longer-term (1–4 years) opportunities for Pacific workers. The success of these schemes has profoundly affected demographics in the most active sending countries. In 2023–2024, one in four Tongan adult men aged between 20 and 54 was working in temporary labour schemes in Australia or New Zealand (Curtain 2025).

## 2.3. RAPID URBANIZATION

The concentration of services and jobs in capitals and major towns has driven rapid urbanization. Urban residents now form half or more of the population in countries such as Kiribati, Marshall Islands and Tuvalu (Connell 2017). This creates overcrowding, housing and service delivery challenges in urban centres, while outer islands experience depopulation. Politically, urban residents are under-represented in parliaments, but urbanization has fostered new forms of political identity and civic participation (Barbara and Keen 2017; Baker and Barbara 2020).

## 2.4. CHAIN MIGRATION

Migration, both internal and external, often follows ‘chain’ patterns, whereby initial migrants facilitate the movement of their family and other community members. Preferential migration pathways (see Table 1.1) facilitate this movement; 94 per cent of the Pacific Islanders living outside the region reside in the United States, New Zealand or Australia (Doan et al. 2023). A commonly cited example is Springdale, Arkansas. In the late 1980s, John Moody, a Marshallese citizen, moved to the city and found work in a food processing factory. When Moody spread the word to friends and family about the employment opportunities and low cost of living in the area, more

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Marshallese began to move there (McClain et al. 2020). Today, the Springdale area has the largest Marshallese population in the world outside of Hawai'i and the Marshall Islands itself.

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## 2.5. CONFLICT AND STABILITY

In Papua New Guinea, approximately 12,000 people were displaced as a result of conflict and violence in 2024, and an estimated 84,000 were reported to be living in displacement due to conflict and violence, many of whom were classified as long-term displaced (IDMC 2025). Elections are often trigger points for violence and internal displacement in Papua New Guinea (IOM 2024). Conflict in other parts of the Pacific has also affected migration patterns. Prior to the 1987 military coup, Indo-Fijians made up around half of the total Fijian population, but this has reduced to around one-third in the years since as many have moved overseas (Lal 2024).

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**Island states are the most at-risk in terms of exposure to natural disasters, and climate change impacts compound and exacerbate this vulnerability.**

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## 2.6. NATURAL DISASTERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Displacement due to natural disaster has long been an important dynamic in Pacific migration flows. Island states are the most at-risk in terms of exposure to natural disasters, and climate change impacts compound and exacerbate this vulnerability (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft 2021). Climate-related displacement is already happening in the region and is expected to increase in intensity (see Boege and Rakova 2023; McMichael, Katonivaliku and Powell 2019). In response, governments and regional organizations are developing strategies and frameworks to address the growing challenge of climate displacement, which build on a history of using mobility to deal with environmental challenges (see Underhill-Sem, Newport and Ng Shiu 2024). Responses have been innovative and forward-looking. Kiribati, for example, has explored the concept of migration with dignity, purchasing land in Fiji in 2014 as a potential contingency for future relocation and integrating mobility planning into its national adaptation strategies. More recently, Tuvalu has conceptualized a 'Digital Nation', an initiative that seeks to preserve national sovereignty and identity, and transcend territorial statehood in the event that its physical territory becomes uninhabitable due to sea level rise (see Rothe et al. 2024).

## Chapter 3

# STATUS OF THE ELECTORAL ENFRANCHISEMENT OF PACIFIC MIGRANTS

There is significant diversity across the Pacific region in terms of the proportion of overseas-based citizens. The region comprises some of the most mobile populations in the world and some of the least. Equally, there is notable variation between countries—and at times even within countries from one electoral event to another—in how the electoral enfranchisement of migrants is approached (see Table 3.1).

At one end of the electoral inclusion spectrum are electoral events where overseas voters are formally recognized and actively engaged. Notable examples can be found in recent referendum processes in the Pacific region. In 2019, Papua New Guinea held its first-ever referendum, allowing voters in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville to decide on the region's future political status. For the first time, provisions were introduced to enable overseas voting (see Box 3.1), allowing members of the diaspora to participate in this historic process. In 2024, Vanuatu held its first-ever referendum—a national vote on constitutional reform focused on provisions related to political parties. The referendum was also notable for its active engagement of overseas voters, making it a unique development in the country's electoral history. While overseas polling stations had previously been made available during national elections, such as through a polling station in New Caledonia, this practice had not been consistently applied across electoral cycles. In contrast to previous practice, the 2024 referendum saw the establishment of 22 overseas polling stations: 1 in New Caledonia, 3 in Fiji, 5 in New Zealand and 13 in Australia (Naupa 2025). Domestically, voters in Vanuatu were also permitted to vote at any polling station, rather than being restricted to the location where they were registered, as is the case for national elections. Overseas voters accounted for just over 5 per cent of the total referendum turnout. Given that an estimated 12 per cent of the adult population (aged 20 to 59) is engaged in labour mobility

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**The region comprises some of the most mobile populations in the world and some of the least.**

**Table 3.1. Provisions for absent voter participation in the Pacific, August 2025**

Country	Out-of-constituency voting provisions	Overseas voting provisions
<b>Cook Islands</b>	Electors can vote at a polling station in their assigned electoral constituency, at a mobile polling station or by postal vote	By postal vote
<b>Federated States of Micronesia</b>	Electors can vote at a polling station in their assigned electoral constituency, at a mobile or special polling station or by postal vote	By postal vote, or at an overseas polling station if established
<b>Fiji</b>	Electors can vote at their assigned polling station or by postal vote	By postal vote
<b>Kiribati</b>	Electors can vote at their assigned polling station	None
<b>Marshall Islands</b>	Electors can vote at their assigned polling station, at a special polling station or by postal vote	By postal vote
<b>Nauru</b>	Electors can vote at their assigned polling station	By proxy
<b>Niue</b>	Electors can vote at any polling station in their assigned electoral constituency	None
<b>Palau</b>	Electors can vote at a designated polling station	By postal vote, or at an overseas polling station if established
<b>Papua New Guinea</b>	Electors can vote at their assigned polling station	By postal vote
<b>Samoa</b>	Electors can vote at their assigned polling station or at a mobile or special polling station	None
<b>Solomon Islands</b>	Electors can vote at their assigned polling station	None
<b>Tonga</b>	Electors can vote at a polling station in their assigned electoral constituency	None
<b>Tuvalu</b>	Electors can vote at their assigned polling station	None
<b>Vanuatu</b>	Electors can vote at their assigned polling station or by proxy	By proxy, or at an overseas polling station if established

Sources: International IDEA, Special Voting Arrangements data set, [n.d.], <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/special-voting-arrangements>>, accessed 24 November 2025; ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, [n.d.], <<https://aceproject.org/>>, accessed 24 November 2025.

schemes in Australia and New Zealand (Bedford 2023), this level of external participation roughly corresponds with the overall national turnout rate of 45 per cent (Naupa 2025).

At the other end of the electoral inclusion spectrum, 6 of the 14 countries covered in this regional report have no provisions for overseas voting, and in some the mechanism for registration can also limit participation. In Solomon Islands and other cases, there are also no provisions to vote outside the area in which a voter is registered; all electors are assigned to a specific polling station within their constituency. This creates additional barriers to voters who live outside or are temporarily away from the constituency in which they are registered (see Box 3.2). In the week leading up to polling day, a notable exodus occurs from the capital, Honiara, as voters return to their home communities to cast their ballots. This pattern has both economic and political implications. Travel costs are often borne by candidates, in a practice that raises concerns about voter inducement and the influence of money in politics (see Wiltshire et al. 2019).

In the middle of the spectrum are a diverse range of mechanisms through which internal and external migrants can be included in the electoral process. Six of the 14 countries examined have provisions for postal voting, although in two cases, eligibility to cast a postal ballot is limited to voters who are overseas during the polling period. In some cases, postal voting options are not regularly offered despite legislative provisions that enable them. Two countries provide for proxy voting, allowing a registered voter to nominate another person to cast a ballot on their behalf. Three countries have provisions for the establishment of overseas polling stations. In the case of the Federated States of Micronesia, however, the law restricts these to two locations—one in Guam and one in Honolulu. Moreover, in all three cases, the implementation of overseas voting appears to depend heavily on the availability of financial and human resources for each electoral event.

### Box 3.1. The 2019 Bougainville referendum

A referendum on the Autonomous Region of Bougainville's future political status was held in 2019. The vote was a condition of the 2004 Bougainville Peace Agreement, which was signed following a prolonged and violent secessionist conflict. The referendum was notable for being an 'exemplary electoral process' in the Melanesian context (Regan, Baker and Oppermann 2022: 60). A relatively large budget and significant support from donor agencies allowed several key innovations in terms of enabling the participation of absent voters (BRC 2020b).

Bougainvilleans who were not resident in Bougainville were deemed eligible to participate in the vote, and 12,715 registered to do so (just over 6 per cent of the total electoral roll). Of these, around 300 were located overseas in Australia and Solomon Islands;<sup>1</sup> the remainder were located in other provinces of Papua New Guinea. Polling was made available for non-resident Bougainvilleans in two locations in Australia (Brisbane and Cairns) and two in Solomon Islands (Gizo and Honiara), as well as all provinces of Papua New Guinea, with the exception of Southern Highlands which had no registered voters for the referendum, and four work stations in Papua New Guinea with significant numbers of Bougainvillean workers—Ok Tedi Mine, Lihir Mine, Porgera Mine and Ramu Plantation (see BRC 2020b).

Postal voting was also offered, including for voters who were outside of Bougainville during the polling period. This further enabled voting by non-residents, including for one eligible voter who was residing in Nauru (BRC 2020a). In total, 435 postal votes were issued and 313 were returned (BRC 2020b). Because of the commitment to anonymizing the ballot distribution as part of the referendum process, no turnout figures for individual stations or polling locations were officially published. It is therefore difficult to assess the engagement of non-resident voters in the referendum process.

1 According to the Final Report of the Bougainville Referendum Commission, the exact number was 313 (BRC 2020b).

### Box 3.2. Cross-border registration in Solomon Islands

While the Constitution of Solomon Islands (1978) requires voters to be ‘ordinarily resident’ in the constituency in which they are registered, the Electoral Act (2018) interprets this to include either continuous residence for more than six months or ancestral affiliation with that constituency. In practice, this allows many internal migrants to remain registered in their home constituencies. However, in the absence of provisions for out-of-constituency voting, this significantly increases barriers to participation for those living elsewhere in the country.

Another recent dynamic in Solomon Islands elections is the rise of what is referred to as ‘cross-border registration’, where a significant number of voters change their registered constituency between elections. In the 2019 general elections, this practice accounted for approximately 15 per cent of the total electoral roll. Concerns have been growing about the potential for electoral manipulation. Reports suggest that candidates have offered inducements to voters in exchange for changing their registration or that organized voter blocs solicit payments in return for shifting their support to a different constituency. In some constituencies, the voter roll increased by more than 50 per cent in the lead-up to the 2024 general elections, figures that far exceed the rate of national population growth. An election survey found that nearly one in five respondents had been asked to change their voter registration to a different constituency. The same study revealed a diversity of public opinion on the issue of cross-border registration and whether the practice is fair (Wiltshire et al. 2024).

Any consideration of reforms to enable out-of-constituency voters in Solomon Islands must take account of the practice of cross-border registration. Notably, the surge in cross-border registration during the 2019 general elections coincided with a trial of out-of-constituency registration that allowed voters in Honiara to register in their home constituency without physically travelling there (see Wiltshire et al. 2019). This overlap raises legitimate concerns. If out-of-constituency voting were to become more accessible, there is a strong likelihood that cross-border registration could increase further, potentially exacerbating risks of electoral manipulation. Given that internal migration is a far bigger driver of movement than international migration in the case of Solomon Islands, however, introducing out-of-country voting would probably have a more limited risk profile.

## Chapter 4

# CHALLENGES TO THE ELECTORAL ENFRANCHISEMENT OF PACIFIC MIGRANTS

Adopting measures to expand voting rights for the absent voters of the Pacific Islands faces a myriad of challenges.

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**While electoral laws may, in theory, be easier to amend, legislative processes in many Pacific parliaments are frequently slow, and reform agendas are often delayed by overloaded parliamentary pipelines.**

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### 4.1. COMPLEX LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

In several countries, electoral provisions are embedded in constitutions, which often have significant—if not in insurmountable—barriers to amendment. Fiji, for example, has particularly restrictive constitutional requirements. While electoral laws may, in theory, be easier to amend, legislative processes in many Pacific parliaments are frequently slow, and reform agendas are often delayed by overloaded parliamentary pipelines. These challenges are compounded in politically unstable contexts, where the threat of no-confidence motions can trigger snap elections and disrupt parliamentary proceedings, as occurred in Vanuatu and Samoa in 2025. In other cases, such threats result in governments curtailing the number of sitting days, further limiting opportunities for legal reform.

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### 4.2. RISKS TO ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

Expanding voting rights for absent voters almost inevitably introduces risks to electoral integrity. Out-of-constituency voting can increase the potential for impersonation and double voting, particularly in countries where voting already occurs over multiple days, such as in most areas of Papua New Guinea. Proxy voting

arrangements, if loosely implemented, may also open the door to manipulation, coercion or vote buying. If regulated too strictly, however, they risk limiting voters' ability to make effective use of the mechanism. Meanwhile, electronic voting systems, while often proposed as solutions for remote participation, raise their own set of vulnerabilities. Cybersecurity remains a significant concern in the region. In 2022, a cyberattack shut down government systems in Vanuatu for over a week, underscoring the fragility of the country's digital infrastructure.

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### 4.3. FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Elections in the Pacific are complex and costly undertakings. For example, the 2012 general elections in Papua New Guinea are estimated to have cost approximately USD 63 per voter, making it among the most expensive electoral processes in the world (Howes 2014). Introducing additional voting mechanisms to enable, or facilitate, the participation of absent voters will add to the already significant financial burden of elections. In contexts where elections already strain government budgets, the sustainability of such expansions becomes a significant concern.

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### 4.4. INSTITUTIONAL AND OPERATIONAL CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS

EMBs in the Pacific region are often under-resourced, operating within funding cycles that peak immediately before an election and decline sharply afterward. This short-term, inconsistent, event-based funding model hampers long-term planning and institutional strengthening. As a result, EMBs struggle to manage even the existing provisions for absent voters, such as postal voting and the establishment of overseas polling stations—measures that are not always feasible to implement effectively due to logistical, staffing or administrative challenges. Expanding such provisions without strengthening operational capacity risks undermining implementation and public confidence.

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## 4.5. POLITICAL BARRIERS TO CHANGE

In many countries across the region, a significant proportion of the population resides overseas, raising the possibility that more accessible voting rights could meaningfully alter political outcomes. This creates political disincentives to expand or enable voting rights, as incumbents might perceive such reforms as a threat to their electoral prospects. However, political inertia can also emerge in the opposite direction. In 2016, a move by the government of Marshall Islands to restrict existing postal voting rights for overseas citizens prompted widespread opposition and was ultimately reversed (see Box 4.1).

### Box 4.1. Postal voting in Marshall Islands

Marshallese citizens who reside overseas (the vast majority of whom are based in the USA) are entitled to cast postal ballots in elections. Given that overseas-based Marshallese make up approximately one-third of the total voting population, the volume of postal ballots can be considerable. This has two important implications. First, it extends the electoral timeline, as vote counting cannot be completed until the deadline for the return of postal ballots has passed. Second, it can lead to significant shifts in results between the preliminary count and the final certified outcome.

Postal ballots became a political issue in Marshall Islands following the 2011 election. In 2012, a senator proposed a bill that would remove overseas voting rights, with the rationale that taxpayers and residents should have the sole right to choose their representatives. The bill was highly controversial and did not garner any support from within the Nitijela, the national legislature (Kupferman 2013).

In 2016, the issue came to the fore again, when another bill sought to restrict postal ballots to those voters who could demonstrate that they were ordinarily resident in Marshall Islands. The rationale was similar to the previous attempt, although the cost and time frame of elections were also cited. This time, the legislation passed narrowly. Public opposition was intense, and the Council of Iroij (chiefs) made a notable intervention in politics to advocate a reversal of the legislation (Labriola 2018). A petition seeking to restore overseas voting rights with more than 800 signatures was presented to the Nitijela in 2019 ahead of that year's election. Lawsuits were also filed seeking to overturn the legislation (Labriola 2020). Ultimately, the restriction of overseas voting rights was ruled unconstitutional. The ruling was not made in time for the 2019 general elections, however, in which overseas Marshallese were not entitled to vote. Their voting rights were restored for the 2023 general elections.

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## 4.6. VOTER SECRECY

Many of the available voting methods for enfranchising absent voters, particularly the more cost-effective ones, require voting to occur away from designated polling locations. Proxy voting requires the absent voter to waive their right to a secret ballot. Such arrangements have implications for the protection of voter secrecy and could expose voters to undue influence or intimidation. These risks are especially pertinent in parts of the Pacific where the principle of voter secrecy is weakly institutionalized (see Baker et al. 2025). This could have broader consequences for electoral integrity.

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## 4.7. THREAT OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Trust in electoral processes is often fragile across the region, and there is widespread mistrust in cases such as Papua New Guinea (see Oppermann, Haley and Wiltshire 2025). As digital connectivity has expanded in the region, so too have the reach and impact of political disinformation (Tapia 2024). The Pacific Security Outlook Report for 2023–2024 cited misinformation and disinformation as significant threats to ‘sovereignty and social cohesion’, particularly in connection with national elections (PIF and PFC 2024). Initiatives to expand the enfranchisement of absent voters, especially those that enable voting outside controlled polling environments, could unintentionally amplify this threat, creating new vulnerabilities in already sensitive electoral contexts.

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**The Pacific Security Outlook Report for 2023–2024 cited misinformation and disinformation as significant threats to ‘sovereignty and social cohesion’, particularly in connection with national elections.**

## Chapter 5

# PROSPECTS FOR THE ELECTORAL ENFRANCHISEMENT OF PACIFIC MIGRANTS

Enfranchising the absent voters of the Pacific Islands is not without its challenges. Nonetheless, it would be an important endeavour in a region where mobility is a way of life, urbanization is increasing, and transnationalism is part of the fabric of society. A two-stage potential pathway to reform is outlined below: building a coalition for change; and creating an enabling environment for implementation.

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### 5.1. BUILDING A COALITION FOR CHANGE

This depends on political commitment, public engagement and the fostering of partnerships to engage in the design and trial of new voting mechanisms. This would necessarily be locally led and shaped by the political context of each country.

#### **Political commitment**

Progress on enfranchising absent voters in the Pacific region will depend on the commitment of key political actors, EMBs, civil society organizations and the broader public. Political reform cannot move forward without clear support from government and political leadership, along with a willingness of EMBs to effectively operationalize the necessary changes.

#### **Public engagement**

Experience across the Pacific has shown that public engagement is equally essential. Outreach and consultation efforts should be broad and inclusive, ensuring that communities are meaningfully involved in the reform process. Effective and sustainable reform requires a strategy that provides voters with voice and agency in the decisions

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that affect their participation, including in determining voter eligibility requirements for overseas voters.

### Transnational partnerships and co-design

The need for meaningful public engagement applies not only to those residing in-country, but also to citizens abroad whose political connection and contributions remain significant. In several past cases, the level of interest and engagement from migrant populations has been underestimated or misjudged (see Box 5.1), leading to weak uptake or poorly designed mechanisms. Pacific migrant communities should be engaged not just as beneficiaries, but as active partners in the design and implementation of absentee voting mechanisms. Diaspora associations, church and community networks, cultural institutions and remittance platforms can serve as vehicles for outreach, feedback and even logistical support.

**Pacific migrant communities should be engaged not just as beneficiaries, but as active partners in the design and implementation of absentee voting mechanisms.**

#### Box 5.1. Overseas voter representation in Cook Islands

The issue of absent voters has always been salient in Cook Islands, where more Cook Islanders live overseas than in the country. As part of a suite of reforms in 1981, two additional seats were added to the Cook Islands Parliament to increase its size to 24 members; one of these seats was instituted to represent overseas voters. This was in large part a response to controversy over ‘fly-in votes’ in previous elections, or the practice of parties chartering planes or subsidizing plane tickets for voters based overseas to return for polling (see Hassall 2001: 624).

Despite this initiative, which established not just overseas voting but separate representation for non-resident Cook Islanders, engagement with the electoral process by overseas voters was persistently low. In the 1994 elections, there were just 737 registered overseas voters, only 569 of whom cast ballots; in practice, despite the generous provisions enabling overseas voting, ‘only a fraction of those entitled to vote bother to do so’ (Hassall 2001: 625–26; see also Hassall 2007).<sup>1</sup> The costs associated with maintaining the overseas voters’ seat made it unpopular with the domestic population (Hassall 2001). The seat was ultimately abolished in 2003 (Hassall 2007).

<sup>1</sup> To be eligible to register, overseas Cook Islanders must have been out of the country for less than three years, meaning the eligible population is a small fraction of the broader diaspora.

### Phased and context-specific experimentation

Rather than a single-model solution, reforms could be trialled incrementally, tailored to national contexts. For example, telephone voting is a relatively cost-effective option that could be piloted in countries with relatively small numbers of dispersed overseas voters. A phased approach would allow for gradual scaling-up

while managing risk, testing institutional readiness and adjusting procedures based on experience and maintaining public trust.

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## 5.2. CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR IMPLEMENTATION

This involves developing shared frameworks and principles for reform, facilitating peer support and exchange of know-how, information and ideas, and collaborating to address legal and regulatory challenges. This is where international development partners and regional organizations and networks can play an important role in fostering shared learning and encouraging practical cooperation among EMBs and electoral stakeholders across the region.

### Shared frameworks and principles

Regional organizations such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), in collaboration with electoral networks and civil society, could develop non-binding guidelines on electoral inclusion and external voting. Such frameworks would not only create a shared reference point for best practices in the region, but also foster mutual accountability and information exchange. This could support countries with aligning reforms with international norms, while remaining sensitive to Pacific-specific contexts and constraints.

### Expanding support for the PIANZEA Network and regional EMB cooperation

The Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand Electoral Administrators (PIANZEA) Network already serves as a critical hub for information exchange, the pooling of resources and joint problem-solving among the EMBs in the region. Building on this established foundation, further investment in PIANZEA could enable the network to deepen its focus on absentee voting through the development of shared technical guidance, comparative legal analysis and reform blueprints tailored to Pacific contexts. It could also help scale-up existing mechanisms for peer support and secondment, ensuring that countries with limited capacity can benefit from the experience of those further along in reform implementation. In addition, the PIANZEA Network could facilitate partnerships between EMBs and civil society actors, including transnational networks, to enhance outreach and voter education efforts across borders.

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**Regional organizations such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), in collaboration with electoral networks and civil society, could develop non-binding guidelines on electoral inclusion and external voting.**

### **Development partner support for reform and operationalization**

Once legal and regulatory frameworks are in place, attention can shift to financial and capacity-related challenges. Strengthening the resourcing for EMBs is essential and needs to be prioritized in any discussion on electoral reform. Development partner assistance could be instrumental in this area, both through technical support and by helping to distribute the financial burden. This approach is particularly relevant in the Pacific context, where migratory dynamics are distinctive. Unlike many other regions of the world, overseas communities are largely concentrated within a relatively small geographical area, particularly in Australia and New Zealand. Support for overseas polling stations, for example, is relatively easy to arrange in this context. This regional proximity makes the organization of overseas polling stations and related infrastructure more feasible and cost effective, offering a practical opportunity to expand access to the vote for absent citizens.

### **Leveraging digital infrastructure and innovation**

Although cybersecurity and trust remain critical concerns, the strategic and gradual adoption of digital solutions—such as electronic voter registration, remote ballot request systems or piloted e-voting platforms—could help to facilitate access for geographically dispersed citizens. Where appropriate, existing regional digital governance initiatives (such as the Pacific Digital Economy Programme) and new approaches to the creation of shared, cost-effective and accessible digital infrastructure could be aligned with electoral access goals. However, any digital approach should be grounded in robust safeguards for voter privacy, system transparency and public trust. It should also prioritize digital literacy and awareness for public officials and communities.

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**Strengthening the resourcing for EMBs is essential and needs to be prioritized in any discussion on electoral reform.**

## Chapter 6

# CONCLUSIONS

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**While principles of universal suffrage are well-grounded in the region, until now they have not consistently been extended to absent voters.**

The Pacific Islands is a region with a strong history of democracy. There is an established commitment to democratic principles and practices among Pacific Islanders, from political elites to ordinary citizens (see Baker et al. 2025). The enfranchisement of absent voters represents a challenge—but also an opportunity for more representative forms of democratic governance in the Pacific.

The enfranchisement of the absent voters of the Pacific Islands is an important issue. New patterns of movement, linked to labour mobility, climate-driven displacement and other contemporary phenomena, are building on a long-established base of migration. While principles of universal suffrage are well-grounded in the region (Palmieri, Howard and Baker 2023), until now they have not consistently been extended to absent voters. In creating more inclusive and equitable electoral processes, the enfranchisement of absent voters helps to enabling participatory structures that are appropriate for and relevant to the communities they serve—both in their home areas and abroad.

The roadmap outlined identifies two stages. The first, building a coalition for change, is necessarily context-specific and driven by domestic actors. The second is creating an enabling environment for implementation, where regional networks and development partners can play a support role in advancing reform. While each Pacific country has its own electoral history, administrative capacity and political context—meaning that pathways to the enfranchisement of absent voters will differ—there are nonetheless clear opportunities for regional collaboration to support and reinforce national processes.

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Migration is deeply woven into Pacific life, yet many citizens who study, work or settle abroad remain excluded when elections take place at home. This report examines that democratic gap. It compares legal provisions and electoral practices across Pacific countries and shows how current arrangements either enable or prevent voting by citizens outside their constituency or country. Using recent referendums and national elections as reference points, it explains why mobility has increased while enfranchisement has not.

The report identifies the legal, operational and political barriers that limit reform and outlines practical, context-specific pathways to expand participation without compromising electoral integrity. It highlights where incremental approaches, regional cooperation and engagement with diaspora communities can reduce costs and build trust. The publication is intended for policymakers, electoral management bodies, development partners and civil society actors seeking to design credible and workable mechanisms to ensure that Pacific citizens remain represented, wherever they live.

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