

Ethics and the politics of school fees in the 2017 national elections

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Abstract

A study of Divine Word University (DWU) students in the 2007 PNG national elections observed how candidates in the electorates where the institutions are based try to get the students to vote for them, often by offering inducements. The current paper follows up that study, focussing on the opinions and behaviour of Engan students at Divine Word University during the 2017 Papua New Guinea national elections. Some Engan students accepted substantial contributions toward school fees. These contributions were not from candidates in Madang, but from Enga, and those who accepted felt morally obliged to give their vote to the donor. Of interest are the student responses. Many of those who accepted money did so not simply for the sake of money, but as part of family or tribal obligations and to that extent it involved 'ethical' reflection. Those who considered it wrong also provided reasons that show evidence of ethical reflection. They considered it wrong because "it is like selling your birthright" or "taking away people's freedom." In the Engan context one does not want to end up playing hide and seek with embittered supporters of failed candidates.

Key words: Inducements, corruption, ethical behaviour, responsible behaviour, ethical practices, ethical training, tertiary students, tertiary institutions, national elections

Introduction

Politics in Enga Province in the Papua New Guinea Highlands is known for its intensity. I have written previously about the 'political culture' that has emerged (Gibbs 2004, 2013). It is a culture which draws on traditions but adapts to modern realities. A tradition that has been adapted in recent times is the system of exchange whereby one gives to another with the expectation of return. It is a system of give and take where 'I give this to you, so you do that for me.' It is a two-way process with candidates exploiting the expectations of voters by presenting gifts, cash and services to people in order to gain popularity, and in turn people offer gifts and cash to candidates in order to show that they are supporters, and on polling day they are expected to give their vote for the candidate. Voting for a successful candidate should ensure continued assistance after the elections.

Particularly in the Highlands, politicians are expected to support social activities such as sporting events, and to make contributions to the payment of marriage and compensation payments, funeral expenses and school fees. The sitting member is

expected to provide both cash and services. This expectation may turn out to be fulfilled because members of parliament (at least those on the side of the government) have access to funds meant for development within their electorates. Whether gifts of cash, goods or services may be regarded as a gift or a bribe depends on timing and the motive or intention.

At election time, services and gifts inevitably have a hidden motive with strings attached. This may be seen as a form of bribery that takes away freedom of choice for the people. There is no secret vote as scrutineers and others are usually able to see how a person votes. So, a candidate will know if persons have paid back gifts and services with their votes. In turn they can expect continued assistance if the candidate wins. In the Enga Province there is a well-known expression *nenge nanengipi* ('eaters and non-eaters'). Those who are supporters of a successful candidate will be 'eaters' for the following five-year term, while those who supported losing candidates will be 'non-eaters'. The expression came into common usage through the experience of public servants, particularly those who find themselves unemployed after the elections (Gibbs 2003).

Matbob's (2012) study of Divine Word University (DWU) students and what he calls benefits or inducements for students during the 2007 PNG national elections is instructive. He observed how being away from home students are often unable to vote in their home electorate for candidates that they know. However, candidates in the electorates where the institutions are based try to get the students to vote for them, often by offering inducements. Matbob highlights what the students thought about the practice of candidates offering inducements to voters and whether they have traded their votes for inducements. The current paper follows up Matbob's study, focussing on the opinions and behaviour of Engan students at Divine Word University during the 2017 Papua New Guinea national elections.

Purpose of this study

The question arises, ten years after Matbob's study, what is the situation for students at DWU during the 2017 national elections? As in 2007, are there still efforts by candidates and their supporters to secure the vote of students? Are students still being offered inducements in order to get their support? What is the attitude of students to such behaviour? These are questions behind this study. I have chosen not to study the experience of the whole student body at DWU, but rather to focus on the Engan students. They provide a relatively large culture group with a common language and similar customary traditions and represent a homogeneous group studying far from their homes at election time.

Methods

The writer gathered data through observation both on campus in Madang and as leader of a domestic observer team in the Enga Province during the elections. Two questionnaires (Appendix 1, Appendix 2) were circulated among Engan students at the

Madang campus of DWU. In 2017 there were 1770 students on the Madang campus, approximately 80 of whom identified as coming from Enga. Questionnaires were distributed to Engan students and retrieved by DWU Engan club leaders. The first questionnaire was circulated at the end of May, two weeks before polling and the second in August, two months after polling.¹ SPSS software was used for data analysis.

Findings

In 2017, the situation on campus was very different to 2007. The 2007 election was the first to use Limited Preferential Voting (LPV) and the PNG Electoral Commission faced the task of educating voters in how this worked; Matbob observed LPV awareness being conducted on campus. In this election, a polling booth was located within the DWU main campus, and students joined the residents of Ward 5 of Madang Urban Local Level Government to vote, a part of the Madang Open electorate. After polling, the counting of votes for Madang Open was held in the university hall (Matbob 2012, p. 57). Matbob saw how candidates entered the campus to try to woo students' votes. Students were encouraged to enrol to vote in Madang and in return they were offered benefits such as free entry to the candidate's entertainment venue and alcohol.

The 2017 election was the third to use LPV and I did not observe LPV awareness on campus. This time polling booths were located outside the two gates of the campus ('Divine Word University Gate' and 'Tri Lain'). Ballots for each of the province's six open electorates were secured in containers outside the Jomba Police Station, 2 km southwest of the university and counting was done in a location away from the University. I did not observe or hear of candidates coming onto campus in order to enlist students and attract their votes. Some students did attempt to vote on polling day, but a good number were turned away because their names could not be located on the roll. I surmise that part of the reason for the change was the political atmosphere in 2017 with student unrest and the suspension of classes at three of the four Government-run universities. The university administration had endeavoured to keep student activism low key at DWU and this may have influenced active participation in the elections. Of the Engan students asked, only thirty-nine percent said that they had attended a Madang rally, one writing 'Madang rallies are boring'.

Pre-poll questionnaire

The first questionnaire was distributed to Engan students in late May, two weeks before the polling. Fifty-two Engan students responded – 34 male and 18 female.²

¹ The study received ethics approval from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Faculty Research Committee, approval No. FASS/FS/1/2017.

² DWU has equal numbers of male and female students. However, there are more male Engan students than female ones. The number of respondents represents approximately two thirds of students from Enga at DWU in 2017.

Pre-poll	N	Out of
Respondents from among all Engan students on campus	52	~80
Enrolled for the 2017 election?	30 (58%)	52
Of those enrolled – enrolled in Enga?	21 (70%)	30
Of those enrolled – enrolled by themselves	10 (33%)	30
Of those enrolled – enrolled by friend or relative	17 (57%)	30
Of those enrolled – didn't know who enrolled them	3 (10%)	30

Table 1. Enrollment details for the respondents to the pre-election questionnaire.

Table 1 shows the enrolment circumstances of the respondents. As may be seen, two thirds of the students said they were enrolled, with the majority being enrolled in Enga. Of this group, a majority did not enrol themselves but were enrolled by somebody else.

Pre-poll	N	Out of
Respondents who gave reasons for being enrolled / not enrolled	28	52
Civic duty	13 (46%)	28
Curious	1 (3.5%)	28
Family expectation	1 (3.5%)	28
Of those not enrolled – didn't know how	10 (36%)	28
Of those not enrolled – long way from home	3 (11%)	28

Table 2. Why were students enrolled?

Table 2 shows responses as to why students were enrolled. Of the 25 students who replied, a majority did so out of a sense of civic duty. Several said they were responding to family expectations or were simply curious. Of those not enrolled, the majority said they didn't know how to enrol. Did the students plan to vote? The majority of students planned to vote, though a few said they did not plan to vote and some were unsure. Of those planning to vote only one said she planned to vote only in Madang. Half said they planned to vote in Enga, three said they planned to vote elsewhere, and interestingly almost half checked the option that they planned to vote in both Madang and Enga. Just how they intended to do this with none saying they were enrolled to vote in Madang is difficult to understand.

Pre-poll	N	Out of
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Number of students who planned to vote	37 (74%)	52
Number of students who did not plan to vote	5 (10%)	52
Number of students who were unsure if they would vote	10 (16%)	52
Number of students planning to vote exclusively in Madang	1 (3%)	35
Number of students planning to vote exclusively in Enga	18 (49%)	35
Number of students planning to vote in both Madang and Enga	16 (43 %)	35

Table 3. Did students plan to vote?

Pre-poll	N	Out of
Number of students offered a benefit or inducement	13 (25 %)	51
Number of students not offered an inducement	38 (75%)	51
Of students offered a benefit or inducement, inducement was intended for them to vote in Enga.	7 (54%)	13
Of students offered a benefit or inducement, inducement was intended for them to vote in Madang.	3 (23%)	13
Of students offered a benefit or inducement, inducement was intended for them to vote elsewhere.	3 (23%)	13

Table 4. Benefits or inducements.

Only a quarter of the respondents said they had been offered a benefit or inducement. In most cases the inducement was money, but in several cases it was food, and for one it was a ride in a car. The same number responded affirmatively to the question whether in fact they had accepted the benefit or inducement offered, so perhaps the respondents conflated the questions as to whether they had been offered an inducement and whether they had accepted it. At least half of those who had received a benefit said it was for them to vote in Enga while only three said it was to vote in Madang.

Post-poll questionnaire

For the second questionnaire, completed at a DWU Engan Student's Club meeting two months after the election, there were 42 respondents: 22 female and 20 male. Where prior to the election 74% said that they intended to vote, in fact this second questionnaire reveals that only 13 (32%) of those attending the student club meeting actually voted: two in Madang, ten in Enga and one elsewhere.

Why did so few vote? Polling in Enga was delayed over a week which meant that those students who had returned home to Enga to vote had to choose between remaining an extra week to vote or alternatively returning to Madang to begin the second semester of studies. Several of those responding recorded this as the reason for them not voting. Another five said they could not vote because, having arrived at their home place, they found that their names were not on the electoral roll.

The question of inducements

Students' comments are consistent in both the pre and post-election questionnaires on whether they consider benefits from candidates as wrong or not and why. Prior to the election 35 (69%) said they thought it is wrong. After the election 30 (71%) said that it was 'not ok'.

What reasons did the Engan students give in support of and against receiving benefits? Possible benefits or inducements such as entry to clubs or socials, sex, alcohol, dances, 'buai and smok', and plane tickets did not enter into their responses. Their main concern was for money to pay school fees.³ One female student said she had accepted K5,000 for school fees, another, K2,000, and another K1500. One male student said he had accepted K3,000 to pay his school fees and another said he had received K1,000 also for school fees. Others recorded lesser amounts.

Other reasons given for accepting benefits as being 'ok' included the following:

- 'It is ok because afterwards they will provide services to benefit us.'
- 'I accepted K150 because I never see services there (in lieu of expected services).'
- 'It is ok because I will cast my vote for them.'
- 'I never asked. They offered.'
- 'It is our (people's) money so I can have a share.'
- 'The K500 was free money.'
- 'I was offered it in a friendly manner.'
- 'It is custom.'
- 'K200 cash was distributed to all students in my tribe.'
- 'Governor Ipatas funded us with school fees.'
- 'I knew the person who gave me the money and I needed it at the time so I accepted it.'
- 'It is only for eight weeks so we can enjoy.'
- 'I accepted K600 because it was money'
- 'It is ok, to buy beer.'

The majority of the students stated that they are against accepting benefits or inducements. One male student said, 'I was offered K200 but I didn't take it because I didn't want to cheat myself.'

Some offered moral or legal arguments such as:

- 'Why not? Because it is a great sin.'

³ One said he had accepted a gift of bricks and cement to build his father's grave.

- ‘It is a democratic country and everyone has the right to vote freely without the inducement of cash or other forms of persuasion.’
- ‘It is against the moral code.’
- ‘It is unethical.’
- ‘I believe it is ethically and morally wrong.’
- ‘It is a crime.’
- ‘Buying votes is wrong.’
- ‘Bribery and corruption is not legal.’
- ‘Why not? It is like selling your birthright.’
- ‘It is against the constitution of our country.’
- ‘As a student I know what is right and wrong.’

Several simply said, ‘It is corruption.’

Other students offered personal arguments such as:

- ‘Because I don’t want to be corrupted.’
- ‘It is not good money.’
- ‘It takes away my freedom.’
- ‘Our individual rights should not be sold.’
- ‘After receiving cash it is like you are in slavery and deprived of rights.’
- ‘I want to be honest to myself.’
- ‘It leaves a sense of guilt in the person who received the cash. They feel obliged to return the favour.’
- ‘It is corruption and I don’t want to support it.’
- ‘I just feel that accepting cash is bad.’

Other students offer practical arguments such as:

- ‘You are wasting your vote.’
- ‘Because we don’t really know who will win so we should not accept their money.’
- ‘It takes away people’s freedom.’
- ‘Supporters force people to vote for ones they don’t want to vote for.’
- ‘Because you have to vote for them even if they are corrupt.’
- ‘Candidates should be able to win without bribery.’
- ‘Money is making decisions (not people).’
- ‘It will destroy the future of our country.’
- ‘Through bribery people lose their choice to change the nation and benefit future generations.’
- ‘To avoid conflict after the election.’
- ‘Accepting cash money will mean it will come back to me after the election.’
- ‘Because my life is at risk after the election.’
- ‘I don’t want to risk my life.’
- ‘It brings more problems when he/she doesn’t win.’

The last five responses above refer to the recrimination and violence that erupts regularly during and after the counting and declaration of election results in Enga. Supporters of losing candidates will accuse those who supported rival candidates and this often leads to penalties, physical violence, and even killing. One student puts it in terms of, 'I didn't want to play a hide and seek game.'

An argument brought forward by several students is, 'It is the people's money.' This is an ambiguous statement that can be interpreted either as 'It is public money so I should have a share' or that since it is 'people's money' candidates have no right to access it for bribery.

Discussion and Implications

When asked to comment, students recall the 2017 national elections in very negative terms. Prior to the election they highlighted political corruption and the misuse of public funds. After the election, they said that it was a 'failed election' and the worst and most corrupt election ever and that in Enga people were intimidated, threatened and bribed to vote.

National issues figured in the 2017 election more than in previous elections, yet elections for Enga are an intensely fought affair within the province and in many ways provincial politics takes precedence over national politics. This may be reflected in the way so few Engan students studying in Madang actually enrolled or planned to participate in polling in Madang.

The political situation is evolving so whereas LPV was novel in 2007 and there was energy and interest to have LPV awareness on campus, there seems little interest ten years later. One should not conclude however, that such awareness is not needed. At the university SRC elections in 2017 it was claimed that LPV principles similar to those of the national election were followed, but that was not the case and the correct procedures for elimination were not followed.

Some students had accepted substantial contributions to school fees, and because of that they felt morally obliged to give their vote to the donor. One can hardly call this an 'incentive'. The funds were not given solely to obtain one vote, but were part of a structure of customary obligations with the student being only one element in a complex of clan-based transactions.

I think the most interesting aspects of this study are the responses of the majority students as to why they consider benefits or incentives to be 'ok' or not. Many of those who accepted money did so not simply for the sake of money, but for the sake of a relationship, whether personal or as part of a family or tribe and to that extent it involved 'ethical' reflection.

Those who considered it wrong also provided reasons that show evidence of ethical reflection. Not only did they say it was wrong but they gave reasons, whether moral or

legal, personal or practical. They considered it wrong because it is like selling your birthright or taking away one's freedom. Individual rights cannot be sold. One does not want to end up playing hide and seek with embittered supporters of failed candidates. Could such responses reflect insight gained from ethics classes at the university?

In 2017, students were able to capitalize on the fact that elections were being held to obtain funds for school fees. If this was an election year windfall, then the question remains of how Enga students will get school fees in a year when there is no election?

References

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Appendix 1. Pre-polling Questionnaire.

1. M / F

2. Age

3. Are you originally from Enga? Yes / No

4. How many years have you lived in Madang?

5 Are you enrolled for the 2017 national election? Yes / No / Don't know

If yes, enrolled where:

- Madang
- Enga
- Both Enga and Madang
- Other

6 If yes, did you enroll yourself or did someone else enrol you. Self / Other

7. If someone else enrolled you, was it:

- another student
- a relative
- the supporter of a candidate
- enrolled by the candidate him/her self.
- I am enrolled but I don't know who enrolled me.

8. If you enrolled yourself, what is the main reason why you enrolled?

- I want to vote as my civic duty
- I have enrolled so I can give my vote to pay back the benefits I have received
- I am curious to know what it is like
- My family expect me to enroll
- I enrolled by accident
- Other. (State why:)

9. If you are not enrolled, why?

- I don't know how to enroll
- I can't be bothered enrolling
- I don't like politics
- I am afraid to enroll
- I am not here 6 months, so I am not eligible to enroll here
- I am a long way from home so it is hard to enrol
- Other. (State the reason)

10. Have you attended any campaign rallies here in Madang? Yes / No

11. Do you plan to vote in the 2017 elections? Yes / No / Don't know

12. If yes, do you plan to vote in:

- Madang
- Enga
- Both Madang and Enga
- Elsewhere?

13. If no, why not?

- I don't know who to vote for
- I can't be bothered voting
- I am afraid to vote
- I don't want to be corrupted
- Other (State the reason)

14. Have you been offered some form of benefit or inducement from a candidate or his/her supporters? Yes / No

15. If yes, was it:

- Money (How much?)
- Food
- Entry to a club/social
- Sex
- Alcohol
- Dance
- Buai-smok
- Ride in car
- Plane ticket
- Other (What?)

16. Was the benefit/inducement meant for you to vote in Enga or Madang

17. Did you accept the cash/benefit or inducement offered? Yes / No

Why?

18. Do you believe that getting cash/benefits from candidates is wrong? Yes / No

Why?

19. Any further comments?

Appendix 2. Post-polling Questionnaire.

1. M / F

2. Are you originally from Enga? Yes / No

3. Did you vote in the 2017 elections? Yes / No

4a. If yes, did you vote in:

- Madang
- Enga
- Both Madang and Enga
- Elsewhere?

4b. If no, why not?

- I didn't know who to vote for
- I couldn't be bothered voting
- I was afraid to vote
- I didn't want to be corrupted
- Other (State the reason)

5. Were you offered some form of benefit or inducement from a candidate or his/her supporters? Yes / No

6. If yes, was it: (mark one or more that apply):

- Money (How much?)
- Food
- Entry to a club/social
- Sex
- Alcohol
- Dance
- Buai-smok
- Ride in car
- Plane ticket
- Other (What?)

7. Was the benefit/inducement meant for you to vote in Enga or Madang

8. Did you accept the cash/benefit or inducement offered? Yes / No

Why?

9. Do you believe that getting cash/benefits from candidates is ok? Yes / No (circle one)

Why?

10. Any further comments?