





RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Tradition Meets Democracy: Perceptions of Women's Political Leadership in Samoa

Kerryn Baker<sup>1</sup> , Tuiloma Susana Tauaa<sup>2</sup>, Silafau Sina Vaai<sup>3</sup>,  
Christopher Mudaliar<sup>4</sup> , Michael Leach<sup>5</sup>  and Julien Barbara<sup>6</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia; <sup>2</sup>Department of Social Sciences, National University of Samoa, Apia, Samoa; <sup>3</sup>Department of English and Foreign Language, National University of Samoa, Apia, Samoa; <sup>4</sup>Department of Social Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; <sup>5</sup>Department of Social Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia and <sup>6</sup>Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia

**Corresponding author:** Kerryn Baker; e-mail: [kerryn.baker@anu.edu.au](mailto:kerryn.baker@anu.edu.au)

(Received 15 November 2023; revised 06 June 2024; accepted 15 August 2024)

### Abstract

Women are globally underrepresented as political leaders; as of January 2023, only 17 countries had a woman head of government. Included in this small group is Samoa, which elected Fiame Naomi Mata'afa as its first woman prime minister in 2021 after a fiercely contested election and subsequent protracted legal disputes centered around interpretations of Samoa's 10% gender quota. Drawing on data from the Pacific Attitudes Survey, the first large-scale, nationally representative popular political attitudes survey conducted in the Pacific region, this article examines how the political environment in Samoa shapes opportunities for women's political participation and leadership. Using the theoretical framework of cohabitation, it finds that although there is an enabling environment for women's participation and leadership in formal politics, women's access to decision-making spaces more broadly is still constrained by norms of traditional leadership. This speaks to traditional and nontraditional political norms and practices that coexist, at times uneasily, alongside one another.

**Keywords:** Gender and politics; popular attitudes; political participation; political leadership; Samoa; Pacific Islands; cohabitation; tradition

The political system of Samoa is a unique mix of traditional/customary and modern/western elements. It has a Westminster-style parliamentary system in

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Women, Gender, and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

which the only eligible parliamentarians are those who hold customary chiefly titles. Its subnational government structure is embedded into traditional village governance systems. At all levels, its political systems have historically been dominated by men and male interests, yet in 2016, it introduced the Pacific Islands region's first parliamentary gender quota, and in 2021, it elected the first woman prime minister in the region, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, a highly ranked customary titleholder.<sup>1</sup>

In this aspect, Samoa is not unusual as a postcolonial independent state. The challenge of so-called hybrid governance — fusing traditional and modern elements of the state — is a common one. Hybridity has become a key framework in examining postcolonial governance in Samoa and other contexts (see, for example, Dinnen and Allen 2016; Dziedzic 2022), highlighting the interplay between traditional and modern spheres in constructing the contemporary state; these “do not exist in isolation from each other, but permeate each other and, consequently, give rise to different and genuine political orders that are characterized by the closely interwoven texture of their separate sources of origin” (Boege, Brown, and Clements 2009, 17).

Yet the nature of hybridity suggests a degree of cohesion in state order that is sometimes absent, and that is often highly contested. In Timor-Leste studies, the concept of “cohabitation” has been put forward as an alternative framework. In other words, rather than “hybridizing,” customary, religious, and nontraditional political norms and practices instead coexist to varying degrees of harmony (see Viegas and Feijó 2017).<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we use data from the Pacific Attitudes Survey (PAS) to explore perceptions of women's political leadership in Samoa through the theoretical framework of cohabitation. We find that there is widespread support both for greater numbers of women in politics and for institutional measures to increase women's political representation. Running counter to this, however, is enduring resistance to women's participation in what are seen as more traditional public spaces, and their representation in more traditional leadership roles. This helps to explain the outcome of the 2021 election, in which Fiame's win as the first woman prime minister was strongly contested.<sup>3</sup> That she ultimately prevailed was seen by some as evidence of the strength of Samoa's democratic institutions (see Iati 2022). We argue that it is evidence of cohabitation, in that parliament is largely conceptualized as a nontraditional space.

The article is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of the literature on women, politics, and leadership in Samoa. Next, we set out the theoretical framework of cohabitation and the methodology of the PAS. Then, we use the findings of the PAS to analyze attitudes toward democracy, women's political participation, and measures to increase women's access to leadership in Samoa through the lens of cohabitation. We follow this by examining the 2021 election in Samoa in light of these findings. Finally, we reflect on the implications for the gendered nature of political institutions, and the future of politics, in Samoa.

## Women, Politics, and Leadership in Samoa

Samoa is a small island nation in the Pacific region; it was the first Pacific country to become independent, in 1962. Asofou So'o (2009, 202) has argued that the constitution "blends the institutions and processes of liberal democracy with selected elements of Samoan custom and tradition." Some authors, however, have documented what they perceive as tension between liberal democratic and traditional Samoan governance principles (see Lawson 1996; Tuimaleali'ifano 2001).

There is a widely held belief that Samoan society is relatively gender-equal in comparison to other societies. Traditional Samoan culture emphasizes balance in the roles of women and men, exemplified in concept of feagaiga, the sacred relationship between brothers and sisters seen as the foundation of gender relations (Afamasaga-Fuata'i *et al.* 2012; see also Latai 2015). Scholarship on gender in Samoa, however, has highlighted the tension between the high status of sisters in Samoan culture and enduring gender inequalities, including the relatively low status of wives in their husband's families (Schoeffel 1979) and women's lack of voice in decision-making at the village level (Pa'usisi 2019). There is also a lack of balance in national politics: as of May 2024, only 20 women had been elected or appointed to the Samoan parliament since its establishment.<sup>4</sup>

Male leadership is entrenched through governance traditions at all levels of society. In Samoa, each extended family is led by a matai chosen by consensus. Matai is often translated into English as "chief," although it is a quasi-democratic system as the family decides who receives a matai title, and it can be removed if the matai is considered to be not meeting their obligations (Tchékezoff 1998). Although women are eligible to obtain matai titles in most villages in Samoa,<sup>5</sup> in practice, men make up the majority of matai titleholders. Eligible women often cede potential titles to male relatives, a practice that reflects norms of leadership with men playing a more prominent role — and women a more background role — in village affairs (see Fraenkel 2006; Meleisea *et al.* 2015; Motusaga 2021; MWCSO 2015). The 2021 census showed that just 8.9% of Samoan residents with matai titles were women (SBS 2022).

Traditionally, a key role of matai is to serve on the village council and contribute to decision-making in this way. Yet even when women hold matai titles, they are far less likely to participate in local government than male matai. In some villages, this is because village bylaws specifically prevent women from joining council meetings. In others, the barriers are informal: women report being uncomfortable with the language used in such meetings or lacking confidence to participate because the councils are overwhelmingly male-dominated (Meleisea *et al.* 2015; MWCSO 2015; Sustineo 2022).

A matai title is also an eligibility requirement to contest national elections in Samoa.<sup>6</sup> It can be argued that this reduces gender-based discrimination in political spaces, as rank can "outweigh" gender in a sense, although the relationship between rank and gender is complicated (see Corbett and Liki 2015). Given the disproportionately low number of women matai, it is clear this eligibility requirement constitutes a formal barrier to greater women's political

representation; yet it seems unlikely that changes to eligibility rules would meaningfully impact women's electoral chances, as norms of representation that prioritize matai titleholders are entrenched in Samoan society (see Iati 2022).

In the initial stages of the post-independence political system in Samoa, participation and leadership were largely determined by existing village-based political traditions and customary hierarchies rather than any form of party organization. The first Samoan political party, the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), was not established until 1979, almost two decades after independence. The emergence of a nascent political party system, however, ushered in a new era of Samoan politics (see Schoeffel, Percival, and Boodoosingh 2016). The HRPP formed a government following the 1982 elections, and barring a short period in opposition in 1986–1987, it was in power continuously until 2021.

The HRPP's four decades of dominance in Samoan politics created political stability by ensuring consistency in social and economic policy. The party's regular two-thirds or larger parliamentary majorities enabled the government to enact constitutional change essentially at will. Government policies stymied the emergence of a strong opposition. In particular, a move in 2006 to restrict official recognition to parties with at least eight members of parliament (MPs) effectively blocked opposition parties from receiving government funding (Iati 2013, 456). In the 2016 election, HRPP-endorsed or -affiliated candidates won 94% of the parliamentary seats; the prime minister argued that in the absence of an officially recognized opposition party, HRPP backbenchers would act as an "internal opposition" (Malielegaoi and Swain 2017, 223).

One of the various constitutional changes enacted by the HRPP was a 2013 move to introduce a parliamentary gender quota. The "10% law," as it was known, mandated a minimum level of women's representation in parliament. Under the law, if the threshold was not met at a general election, the highest-polling unsuccessful women candidates would be appointed to parliament to take up additional seats (Baker 2019).

The introduction of the parliamentary gender quota faced some initial opposition, with detractors claiming its use did not align with Samoan culture and traditions (Baker 2019; Motusaga 2016). This line of argument is reflected elsewhere in the region, where gender equality initiatives have been similarly criticized for being culturally inappropriate (see, for example, Lee 2017; Siow 2018). It was also put forward that a quota system would be insulting to women, implying they could not be elected on their own merits. Conversely, supporters emphasized the need for balance in decision-making and highlighted Samoa's poor record on women's political representation (Baker 2019). Ultimately, cabinet's support for the quota and the HRPP's large majority in parliament ensured that the constitutional amendment was passed.

The "10% law" was implemented for the first time in 2016 (see Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel, and Meleisea 2017). In that general election, four women were elected outright; subsequently, one woman was appointed to the 49-seat parliament to make a total of 50 MPs. Fiaame also became Samoa's first woman deputy prime minister following this election.

Although women's parliamentary representation had been consistently low since independence, the quota was seen as largely motivated by external pressures. The government stressed the importance of meeting international obligations in making a case for the quota; the prime minister argued it would "ensure that Samoa keeps up with the modern world in terms of gender equality and fairness" (quoted in Tone 2012). Opposition MPs and the mainstream media promoted the idea that it was a United Nations-driven proposal, with a widespread rumor circulating that the prime minister had been convinced to adopt a quota after sitting next to then-UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon at a dinner (see Baker 2019).

The Samoan gender quota attracted the spotlight following the 2021 election, when attempts were made to use an expanded interpretation of the quota legislation to appoint a sixth woman member of Parliament. This would have deadlocked numbers in the legislature and necessitated a second election, thus potentially stopping Fiamé — now the leader of a rival party to the HRPP — from becoming prime minister. The ultimate peaceful resolution of this constitutional crisis has key lessons for how the cohabitation of customary and nontraditional elements of the Samoan political system work in practice.

## Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this article, we ask the following question: How do Samoan attitudes about traditional governance — and the place of women within these structures — impact their views on women's political participation and leadership? We draw on the concept of "cohabitations" developed in Timor-Leste studies (Feijó and Viegas 2017). Rather than conceiving of the "traditional" and "modern" realms of political legitimacy as combining to form ontologically separate "hybrids," Feijó and Viegas examine the way plural identifications can coexist in subjects and be deployed in distinct forms of sociopolitical engagement. Thus, for example, more traditional modes of authority and spirituality could be maintained in the face of colonial power in complex patterns of accommodation and resistance that persist into the postcolonial era. These plural forms of identification in different contexts may be subject to "mutual recognition" and operate as different symbolic "idioms" (Feijó 2017, 241) deployed in distinct contexts.

As Butler (2012) observes, cohabitation necessarily involves sharing spaces with those we have not chosen. In politics, cohabitation as Feijó (2017) describes it entails adjusting to and acknowledging multiple sets of principles, forms of authority, and sites of legitimacy. These can coexist in harmony or in tension. In postcolonial states like Timor-Leste and Samoa, these cohabitations fundamentally shape political attitudes, behavior, and conflict.

This article draws on data obtained from the PAS: the first large-scale, nationally representative (n=1319) popular political attitudes survey conducted in Samoa (see Leach *et al.* 2022). The survey included a total of 181 questions across 25 thematic modules covering a range of topics including attitudes toward democracy, national identity, leadership, governance, development, and international relations. Systematic random sampling was used for the selection of

households, with individual selection alternating by gender to reflect the roughly equal proportion of men and women in Samoa. Data collection took place in December 2020 and January 2021. This time period is particularly instructive, allowing the findings to be viewed in light of the results of the April 2021 election and subsequent constitutional crisis. This was a critical event in Samoan politics, highlighting the “shifting notions regarding the respective roles of the formal Constitution and of traditional authority in national politics” that have occurred over time (So’o 2022, 408).

### **Attitudes toward Women in Politics and Decision-Making in Samoa**

The results of the PAS tell a story of attitudes toward women in politics and decision-making in Samoa that is broadly positive. The vast majority of respondents believed that Samoa is a gender-equal society and that this extended to the formal political sphere. Findings revealed substantial support for a woman prime minister and for temporary special measures to facilitate women’s access to parliament. But this widespread support for women’s access to formal political spaces did not extend to roles and political forums that were seen as more traditional. A distinction between traditional (head of state and village leadership) and nontraditional (member of parliament and prime minister) forms of governance emerged clearly from the data. This has significant implications in terms of where women’s access to leadership spaces is deemed legitimate or not, as we see different — and at times contrasting — norms around women’s political participation that coexist alongside each other.

### **Support for Women’s Political Representation**

The survey found generally high support for women’s representation in politics. Almost nine out of ten (88%) respondents supported the statement that “women should be involved in politics as much as men,” with no significant differences between male and female respondents (Table 1). In other questions, however, a generational gap emerged, with younger Samoans less likely to support a more active role in government for women.

When asked their thoughts around the number of women in parliament, 56% of respondents believed there were too few, 37.5% believed the number was “just right,” and just 6.5% believed there were too many, again with no significant differences between male and female respondents. Intergenerational differences were evident here, with respondents aged 30 or above (59%) more likely to report there were “too few” women in parliament compared to younger Samoans (49%). Those with tertiary education (65%) were also more likely to think that there were “too few” women in parliament compared with the primary- and secondary-educated respondents (53%).<sup>7</sup>

Surveyed several months before the first woman prime minister of Samoa took office, a notably large majority — 85% — of respondents agreed that “a woman should become prime minister of our country,” with 61% reporting strong agreement. Women were more likely to strongly agree (67%) than men

**Table 1.** Gender and politics: *How much do you agree with the following? (%)*

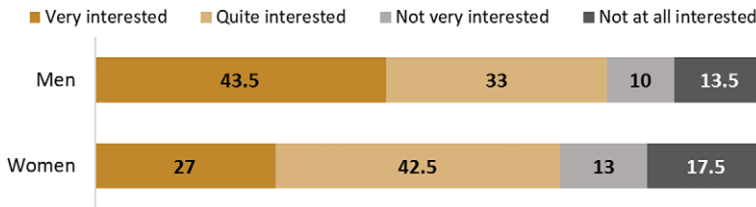
Indicator	Strongly agree	Agree	Total agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Women should be involved in politics as much as men.	46	42	<b>88</b>	8.5	3
A woman should become prime minister of our country.	61	24	<b>85</b>	9	5.5
A woman should become head of state in our country.	24.5	25.5	<b>50</b>	25.5	24
There should be temporary special measures to increase women's representation in parliament.	38.5	39	<b>77.5</b>	15	7
In general, men are better at political leadership than women.	16.5	27	<b>43.5</b>	29.5	26
University education is more important for a man than a woman.	5	15.5	<b>20.5</b>	30	49
Women should not speak in village councils.	17.5	18.5	<b>36</b>	26	37.5
Men and women should have the same rights to own land.	62.5	24.5	<b>87</b>	8.5	4.5

(57%). Again, there were age differences: whereas 65% of respondents aged 30 or above strongly agreed that “a woman should become prime minister,” this figure dropped to 51% for the younger cohort.

Although popular attitudes toward women's participation in politics were generally positive, there was nonetheless a substantial proportion of respondents who viewed women as less capable political actors, with 43.5% agreement that “in general, men are better at political leadership than women.” There were no significant gender differences, but education levels were a significant factor here: tertiary-educated respondents (35%) were less likely to agree than primary- or secondary-educated respondents (46%). Past studies of women in politics in Samoa have noted a pervasive public view that leadership roles were best suited for men (see Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel, and Meleisea 2017).

### **Gendered Interest in Politics and Support for Democracy**

In the PAS survey, women (27%) were significantly less likely to report being “very interested” in politics than men (43%). Samoan men (38%) were also more likely to report following news about politics and government daily compared to women (27%). This gendered difference was further reinforced when taking age into account. For instance, Samoan women aged 30–59 were far more likely to be generally interested (74%) in politics compared to women aged 21–29 (60%). This was also reflected across both genders, with younger Samoan men also more



**Figure 1.** Degree of interest in politics.

likely to be less interested in politics (63%) compared to adult Samoan men (83%) who registered the most interest in politics overall (Figure 1).

The reasons for the gender and age gaps in political interest and engagement are likely to mirror each other — that is, that women and young people feel less connected to political life because the political sphere is dominated by older male voices. This finding reflects similar outcomes globally (GBS 2018, 55). Scholarly literature has demonstrated that the male dominance of politics can impact women’s level of political engagement (Alexander 2012; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007). In Samoa, this male dominance is evident in both village-level and national-level politics (see Baker 2018; Meleisea et al. 2015). These reinforce each other, the most explicit example being that matai titles are required to sit in both village councils and the national parliament. Yet even where women hold titles, local-level leadership norms often prohibit their participation in village governance (see Meleisea et al. 2015; MWCS 2015; Sustineo 2022). Because national-level candidacy requires aspirants to demonstrate *monotaga* (service) to their village — a requirement that is often interpreted to mean participation in village governance — this exclusion from local-level politics has compounding effects on political aspirations.

The PAS also gauged respondents’ preference for democratic systems, as opposed to the alternative of authoritarian rule. Overall, 61% of Samoan respondents agreed that “democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.” By contrast, just 8% of respondents selected “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one.” Notably, however, a substantial cohort (25%) selected the third option: “for people like me, it does not matter what kind of government we have.”

These responses indicate a strong foundation of popular support for democracy in Samoa and a very low level of support for authoritarian alternatives when compared to equivalent responses in Southeast Asian countries (Welsh, Huang, and Chu 2016, 134), for example. Yet they also reveal a substantial minority unconvinced that the choice of political system directly matters to their own lives. When these responses were disaggregated by gender, the picture became somewhat clearer: women were significantly less likely to report that “democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government” (56%, compared to 66% for men) and more likely to report that “for people like me, it does not really matter what kind of government they have” (30%, compared to 20% for men). This finding suggests women feel relatively disempowered in democratic decision-making compared to men.



This may partly explain why women tend to have different attitudes toward political parties in Samoa. For instance, fewer than half (44.5%) of women respondents thought that political parties were suitable for Samoa's system of governance, whereas men were more inclined to believe political parties are suitable (56.5%). Women were also less likely to trust political parties, with only 43% of women reporting trust in political parties, compared to 54% of men.

Taken together, these dynamics can be seen as reflective of the broader gender gap in political representation. Samoan women have historically been underrepresented in parliament and in cabinet. Their marginalization from politics is reinforced by the matai-only eligibility rule — only 3% of adult women in Samoa are matai titleholders, compared to 28% of men (SBS 2022). The electoral gender quota introduced in 2013, however, does at least guarantee a minimum level of women's representation in Samoa's parliament.

Institutional measures such as quotas to increase the number of women in politics — commonly called “temporary special measures” in the Pacific context — are rarely universally supported. Proposals to institute temporary special measures have often been met with significant backlash, both in the Pacific region and globally (see Baker 2019; Krook 2010). Commonly, resistance to temporary special measures centers around the idea of merit, with quotas seen as subverting the principle of equality of opportunity in elections (Dahlerup 2007). This argument was certainly raised in discussion around Samoa's gender quota at its introduction (Baker 2019). Yet the PAS data demonstrated that almost 10 years on, the quota was widely accepted in Samoan society. There was 77.5% support, with no significant gender differences, recorded for the statement “There should be temporary special measures to increase women's representation in parliament.”

### **Women's Access to Leadership Spaces**

The survey showed that widespread support for women's access to parliament does not translate to leadership in other institutions. This was especially true for institutions that were viewed as more traditional. At the village level, 37% of respondents agreed that women should not speak in village councils.

Support for the statement “A woman should become head of state in our country” was comparatively low, with just less than half (49%) of respondents reporting agreement, and no significant gender differences. This result presents a profound contrast with the equivalent figure for prime minister (85%). At the time, no women had been elected or appointed to either of these positions in Samoa's history. The extent to which the current iterations of these positions were seen as “traditional” obviously varied. The O le Ao o le Malo (head of state) position was only created through the 1962 Samoan constitution but has exclusively been held by (male) paramount chiefs. In contrast, although the first three Samoan prime ministers post-independence did hold paramount chiefly titles, the emergence of political parties in the 1980s marked a shift in access to parliamentary leadership positions (see Schoeffel, Percival, and Boodoosingh 2016), and since then, the prime ministerial role has been held by others with lower-ranking titles.

**Table 2.** Political activity

Have you done any of these things in the past three years? (%)			
	Once	More than once	Never done
Gotten together with others to try resolve local problems	17	38	<b>45</b>
Attended a demonstration or protest march	4	3.5	<b>92.5</b>
Have you done any of the following because of personal, family, or neighborhood problems, or problems with government officials and policies? (%)			
	Once	More than once	Never done
Contacted your village Pulenu'u (mayor)	15.5	<b>45.35</b>	39
Contacted village Fono (council)	10.5	<b>49.5</b>	40

Younger people were more likely to agree that a woman could become head of state (55%) than were seniors, aged 60 and above (43%). This was in contrast to the reported attitudes toward a woman becoming prime minister, with fewer young people in favor than older respondents. Although seemingly contradictory, this fits with a wider pattern in the data: although older respondents had more democratic attitudes, they were also more traditional in their outlook. In this way, traditional and democratic principles are not necessarily in tension, but manifest differently.

These results go hand in hand with other aspects of women's overall participation within politics in Samoa — both traditional and formal. Whereas overall participation in different types of political activity was mixed (Table 2), participation by women trended lower than men. For instance, men (42%) were more likely to have “gotten together to try and resolve local problems” than women (33%). Men (19%) were also significantly more likely to have attended rallies when compared to women (9%). These differences were especially profound in relation to contacting traditional institutions. Women reported contacting the village mayor (54.5%) and village council (45%) at significantly lower rates than men (67% and 74.5%, respectively).

From the survey, there is evidence to show that gender norms of participation in traditional leadership spaces persist, even as ideals of gender equality have been mainstreamed more broadly. As noted above, a substantial minority of respondents (37%) agreed with the statement “Women should not speak in village councils.” Yet respondents strongly endorsed the statement “Men and women should have the rights to own land,” with 86% reporting agreement. In neither case were there significant gender differences in responses.

There was a strong positive result to the question “How proud are you of Samoa's fair and equal treatment of women in society?” with 91% of respondents reporting they were proud or very proud. This aligns with the common assertion

that Samoa is a gender-equal society. Gender equal attitudes are certainly reflected in the responses to the question of women's representation in formal political institutions.

This suggests that parliament is increasingly being viewed as a nontraditional leadership space. Attitudes toward matai-only eligibility for parliament seem to attest to this, as only 50% of respondents agreed that "only traditional leaders should be able to run for parliament," with 49% disagreeing. Notably, male respondents (56%) expressed higher degrees of support for matai-only eligibility than women did (44%). This perhaps reflects the gender discrepancy the rule reinforces, with far more men than women eligible to run for a parliamentary seat.

Over time, the positionality of the Samoan parliament has evolved. At its establishment, a central impetus was preserving the traditional governance system — *fa'amatai* — and incorporating this into new political institutions (Lawson 1996). As such, eligibility to both vote and stand for parliament was restricted to matai. In 1990, a referendum to institute universal suffrage narrowly passed, although matai-only candidacy remained. Although these links to traditional governance structures remain, the findings above indicate they are not seen as fundamental to the legitimacy of parliament.

Yet even as the space for women in parliamentary politics — what is now seen as a nontraditional leadership space — seems to be widening, the PAS findings suggest that tradition and culture are still paramount for most Samoans. When asked whether "it is important to respect tradition and culture even if it goes against the law", 85% of respondents agreed. The statement that "government should recognize the traditional way of doing things" attracted even stronger agreement from respondents (97.5%). For both questions, no significant gender differences were reported. This suggests that support for "traditional" governance in traditional spaces — which, throughout Samoa's history and with very few exceptions, has meant male-dominated decision-making — is still high.

## Gender, Cohabitation, and the 2021 Samoan Elections

For most of Samoa's post-independence history, the HRPP dominated, regularly winning parliamentary majorities of two-thirds or larger. As of 2020, the HRPP's Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi was the second longest-serving prime minister in the world, having held the position since 1998. The status quo of Samoan politics, however, faced a major challenge in 2020 as a result of concerted opposition to three related controversial bills. The HRPP government was seeking to make changes to the judicial system that would elevate the status of the Land and Titles Court, which dealt with customary land tenure and matai title disputes. Critics argued that the changes would erode the authority of the Supreme Court and the rule of law in Samoa, creating an untenable system of competing legal and customary judicial structures (see Meleisea and Schoeffel 2022). In themselves, the proposed moves disrupted the established balance between formal and customary institutions in Samoa. The issue caused a dramatic split in the HRPP, with Fiaame resigning as deputy prime minister in protest against the bills.

Fiame was a very experienced cabinet minister and had been an HRPP MP since 1985. She also had a well-known political background: her father, a paramount chief, was Samoa's first prime minister, and her mother, also from a high-ranking chiefly family, was among Samoa's first women MPs (see Spark and Corbett 2020). Leading up to the 2021 election, Fiame became the leader of the newly established opposition party, Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST). Fiame's status as a respected and long-serving politician enhanced the legitimacy of FAST as an opposition force. The party ran a nationwide campaign that centered around Fiame, a vastly different strategy to the decentralized and constituency-focused approach HRPP had come to employ in the absence of a strong opposition (Baker and Palmieri 2023).

This was notable: whereas the HRPP model of campaigning tended to devolve candidate selection to local governance structures, prioritizing a view of politics as village-centered and based in tradition, the FAST party ran a new form of election campaign that centered around national issues. This novel style of politics was exemplified by Fiame, actively campaigning to become Samoa's first woman prime minister. Fiame's wealth of experience in politics enhanced her status as a political contender, but so too did her paramount chiefly family lineage. In this way, Fiame was deriving legitimacy from traditional forms of political status while simultaneously transforming norms of political leadership (Baker and Palmieri 2023). In other words, she was uniquely placed to "ensure continuity while embodying change" (Spark, Corbett, and Fairbairn-Dunlop 2022, 529).

The April 2021 election resulted in a deadlock: HRPP and FAST each won 25 seats, with one independent MP, Tuala Iosefo Ponifasio, also elected.<sup>8</sup> Five women had won seats in the election,<sup>9</sup> leading many to assume that the quota threshold had been met. Yet debate swirled around competing interpretations of the gender quota, fueled by unclear language in the constitutional provision. The legislation refers to "five (5)" women MPs, but also stated that women should make up "a minimum of 10% of Members of the Legislative Assembly".<sup>10</sup> This became an issue with a recent increase in the size of parliament: with 51 members, five women only constituted 9.8% of the legislature.

On the evening of April 20, the head of state issued a warrant of election appointing a sixth woman MP, Ali'imalemanu Momoemasu Alofa Tuuau. Ali'imalemanu was a sitting member and an HRPP candidate, giving them 26 seats in parliament. FAST, which the next day publicly secured the support of Tuala, also giving them 26 seats, immediately challenged the appointment of Ali'imalemanu in court. On May 4, the head of state issued the writs for a second general election citing the deadlock, another decision quickly challenged by FAST.

On May 17, Samoa's Supreme Court ruled in FAST's favor on both the additional woman MP — two of the three judges supported the FAST party's interpretation that five women MPs met the threshold — and on the second election, ordering the head of state to instead convene parliament by May 24. The head of state agreed to convene parliament on that day, only to abruptly backtrack, leading to FAST conducting their own swearing-in ceremony on the lawns outside the locked parliament building — a move that the HRPP labeled "treason" and also challenged in court (Jackson 2021).

Although subsequent appeals established that the minimum threshold of women MPs should be six rather than five,<sup>11</sup> this did not benefit the HRPP electorally in the short term. A July 23 Court of Appeal ruling found the FAST party's swearing-in ceremony to be constitutional, paving the way for Fiame to take office as Samoa's first woman prime minister (Tabangcora 2021). A series of by-elections in November increased FAST's majority in parliament, cementing their hold on government.

The role of the head of state in the political machinations was highly controversial. In previous political crises, as So'o (2022) has observed, the role of the head of state has also been critical, but in those cases, their moves favored traditional norms of leadership: siding with leaders with higher customary status. In 2021, the decisions of the head of state were seen to favor the HRPP and pit the head of state, a paramount chiefly title holder, against the FAST party led by Fiame, the daughter of another paramount chiefly title holder. Many of the head of state's decisions on the 2021 election were found by the courts to be unconstitutional, suggesting "a contradiction between traditional respect for *tama-a-āiga* [paramount chiefs] and the rule of law" (So'o 2022, 421). Although ultimately resolved peacefully, the 2021 constitutional crisis does raise important questions about cohabitation and the political settlement in Samoa.

Given the postelection controversies in 2021, the future of the gender quota has been a topic of public debate. Prominent commentator on gender issues Mema Motusaga (2021) labeled the use of the quota "perverse" and a "mockery" of its objectives. A July 2021 Court of Appeal ruling criticized the drafting of the quota amendment, noting that "mixed messages, confusion and an ambiguity of ideas" in the legislation contributed to the constitutional crisis.<sup>12</sup> A commission of inquiry into the 2021 election recommended reviewing the provision; after the report was tabled, a parliamentary committee initially proposed removing the quota (RNZ Pacific 2023). It was claimed that the majority of submissions to the inquiry did not support the quota provisions (Keresoma 2023), which would be a substantial shift from the levels of support recorded in the PAS prior to the 2021 election.

A series of parliamentary debates in October 2023 demonstrates the question marks over the longevity and sustainability of the quota legislation. After fraught and emotional exchanges, which led to a woman member of parliament openly crying on the floor, the legislature ultimately resolved to reject the parliamentary committee recommendation to remove the quota and instead amend it with clearer wording (Sanerivi 2023). It is clear, however, that the quota will continue to be controversial for some time yet.

## Conclusion

Samoan scholars have warned against viewing tradition and democracy as a dichotomy (see Iati 2022). Yet equally, the idea of "hybrid" institutions in which traditional and democratic practices blend together belies the prospects of conflict and tension, as seen in the 2021 constitutional crisis. So'o (2008) has described the interplay between democracy and custom in Samoa as "an uneasy

alliance.” We argue that the concept of cohabitation, borrowed from Timor-Leste Studies, could inform thinking about how traditional and nontraditional political institutions interact in Samoa and other postcolonial contexts.

This is important for scholarship on gender and politics, as countries like Samoa have much to tell us about gender in postcolonial state contexts. The cohabitation between traditional and democratic politics is important context for how gender informs access to leadership. Traditional norms and practices that favor male leadership can act as serious constraints on women’s pathways to power and decision-making positions, and these can endure even as the political context evolves. At the same time, however, there are potential opportunities for women in political spaces that are seen, or able to be reframed, as nontraditional.

The question of where women sit within Samoa’s political system, and within Samoan democracy, is an important one. As the PAS report notes, the findings generally “point to a distinct model of Samoan democracy in which respect for modern democratic norms is tempered and entwined with respect for tradition and associated notions of hierarchy and community leadership” (Leach et al. 2022, 15). This is a complex balance, and one in which the place of women’s voice in decision-making has been contested over time (see Meleisea et al. 2015; Pa’usisi 2019; Schoeffel 1979). It was a balance that was seriously tested in the political controversy during and directly following data collection for the PAS.

In politics, Samoa now has a woman prime minister for the first time; as of May 2024, there were six women members (12.9%) of the 53-seat Samoan parliament and three women ministers (20%) in the 15-seat cabinet. While gender parity is yet to be achieved, this is the highest level of women’s representation in either institution to date. Yet women’s access to decision-making spaces more broadly is still constrained by norms of traditional leadership. This speaks to the idea of “cohabitation” — traditional and nontraditional political norms and practices that have not hybridized, but instead are coexisting alongside one another.

**Acknowledgments.** This research was funded by the Australian National University and the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the Pacific Research Program.

**Competing interest.** The authors declare none.

## Notes

1. Marshall Islands was the first Pacific country to elect a woman head of government, President Hilda Heine, in 2016.
2. In the context of Timor Leste, “cohabitation” also has another distinct and more common meaning, describing when the president and the prime minister are affiliated with different political parties (see Beuman 2015). In Samoa, with a head of state that is appointed rather than elected, this other meaning does not apply.
3. 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 regard 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. We have followed this convention in this article.

4. This figure excludes those who were unseated due to postelection court decisions.
5. As of 2015, 21 villages did not recognize women matai (Meleisea *et al.* 2015).
6. From 1962 to 1990, suffrage was also restricted to matai. In 1990, a referendum on universal suffrage passed with a narrow majority; although not the main purpose of the change, it had the effect of enfranchising a significant number of women (see Palmieri, Howard, and Baker 2023).
7. According to the 2021 census, 37% of Samoans reported school certificate or lower as their highest education qualification, and 5% reported a bachelor degree or higher as their highest education qualification (SBS 2022).
8. Since the previous election, Samoa's parliament had increased in size from 49 to 51 MPs.
9. Two were HRPP candidates (sitting member Faimalotoa Kika Stowers-Ah Kau and newcomer Leota Aeau Tima Leavai) and two ran for FAST (Matamua Vasati Pulfana and Muliopola Anarosa Ale Molioo). Fiame was elected unopposed in her seat of Lotofaga.
10. See Constitution of Samoa, pt. V, art. 44, § 1A.
11. Ultimately, two women were appointed as additional members in parliament to bring the number up to six, as one MP-elect (Leota Tima Leavai) resigned as part of the settlement of an electoral petition. The Supreme Court then ruled a third additional woman member should be appointed, citing another section of the constitutional provision in relation to resignations. This third appointment was later invalidated by the Court of Appeal.
12. Electoral Commissioner and Anor v. Faatuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (F.A.S.T. Party) and Anor, CA04/21 CA05/21, Supreme Court of Samoa held at Mulinuu, p. 3.

## References

- Afamasaga-Fuata'i, Karoline, Gatloaifa'ana Tilinamua Afamasaga, Epenesa Esera, Talalelei Eseta Fa'afeu-Hope, Lina Tone Schuster, Luagalau Eteuati Foisaga Shon, and Alo Slia Pausisi. 2012. "Aspects of Social Development." In *Samoa's Journey 1962-2012: Aspects of History*, eds. Leasiolagi Malama Meleisea, Penelope Schoeffel Meleisea, and Ellie Meleisea, 141–72. Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- Alexander, Amy C. 2012. "Change in Women's Descriptive Representation and the Belief in Women's Ability to Govern: A Virtuous Cycle." *Politics & Gender* 8 (4): 437–64.
- Baker, Kerryn. 2018. "Gender and Candidate Selection in a Weakly Institutionalised Party System: The Case of Samoa." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 53 (1): 57–72.
- Baker, Kerryn. 2019. *Pacific Women in Politics: Gender Quota Campaigns in the Pacific Islands*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Baker, Kerryn, and Sonia Palmieri. 2023. "Can Women Dynasty Politicians Disrupt Social Norms of Political Leadership? A Proposed Typology of Normative Change." *International Political Science Review* 44 (1): 122–36.
- Beuman, Lydia M. 2015. "Cohabitation in New Post-conflict Democracies: The Case of Timor-Leste." *Parliamentary Affairs* 68 (3): 453–75.
- Boege, Volker, M. Anne Brown, and Kevin P. Clements. 2009. "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States." *Peace Review* 21 (1): 13–21.
- Butler, Judith. 2012. "Precarious Life, Vulnerability and the Ethics of Cohabitation." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26 (2): 134–51.
- Corbett, Jack, and Asenati Liki. 2015. "Intersecting Identities, Divergent Views: Interpreting the Experiences of Women Politicians in the Pacific Islands." *Politics & Gender* 11 (2): 320–44.
- Dahlerup, Drude. 2007. "Electoral Gender Quotas: Between Equality of Opportunity and Equality of Result." *Representation* 43 (2): 73–92.
- Dinnen, Sinclair, and Matthew Allen. 2016. "State Absence and State Formation in Solomon Islands: Reflections on Agency, Scale and Hybridity." *Development and Change* 47 (1): 76–97.
- Dziedzic, Anna. 2022. "Constituencies in a Hybrid State: An Examination of the Shift from 'Territorial' to 'Electoral' Constituencies in Sāmoa." *Journal of Pacific History* 57 (4): 498–523.
- Feijó, Rui. 2017. "'At Home We Wear Cawat, Outside We Wear a Tie': Cohabitation and Political Legitimacy in Grass-Roots Democracy." In *Transformations in Independent Timor-Leste: Dynamics of*

- Social and Cultural Cohabitations*, eds. Susana de Matos Viegas and Rui Feijó, 229–45. London: Routledge.
- Fiti-Sinclair, Ruta, Penelope Schoeffel, and Malama Meleisea. 2017. *Women and Political Participation: The 2016 Election in Samoa*. Apia: Centre for Samoan Studies.
- Fraenkel, Jon. 2006. "The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation in Pacific Parliaments." In *A Woman's Place Is in the House – the House of Parliament: Research to Advance Women's Political Representation in Forum Island Countries*, 57–106. Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.
- Global Barometer Surveys [GBS]. 2018. *Exploring Support for Democracy across the Globe: Report on Key Findings*. Taiwan: GBS.
- Iati, Iati. 2013. "Samoa's Price for 25 Years of Political Stability." *Journal of Pacific History* 43 (4): 443–63.
- Iati, Iati. 2022. "Are Sāmoa's Political Institutions Democratic? A Critical Examination of the Fa'amatai and the 2021 General Election." *Journal of Pacific History* 57 (4): 451–73.
- Jackson, Lagipoiva Cherelle. 2021. "Accusations of Treason as Samoan MPs Hold Swearing-in Ceremony Outside Parliament and Declare New PM." *The Guardian*, May 24. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/24/political-crisis-in-samoa-as-prime-minister-elect-locked-out-of-parliament-to-prevent-swearing-in>.
- Keresoma, Lagi. 2023. "Cabinet Receives Electoral Commission of Inquiry's Report." *Talamua*, May 9. <https://talamua.com/2023/05/09/cabinet-receives-electoral-commission-of-inquirys-report/>.
- Krook, Mona Lena. 2010. *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Latai, Latu. 2015. "Changing Covenants in Samoa? From Brothers and Sisters to Husbands and Wives." *Oceania* 85 (1): 92–104.
- Lawson, Stephanie. 1996. *Tradition versus Democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leach, Michael, Julien Barbara, Ioana Chan Mow, Sina Vaai, Christopher Mudaliar, Patila Amosa, Louise Mataia Milo, Susana Tauaa, Taema Imo-Seuoti, and Vernetta Heem. 2022. *Pacific Attitudes Survey: Samoa*. Canberra: Australian National University, Swinburne University of Technology and National University of Samoa.
- Lee, Helen. 2017. "CEDAW Smokescreens: Gender Politics in Contemporary Tonga." *Contemporary Pacific* 29 (1): 66–90.
- Malielegai, Tuila'epa Sa'ilele, and Peter Swain. 2017. *Pālema: A Memoir*. Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- Meleisea, Malama, and Penelope Schoeffel. 2022. "Sāmoan Custom, Individual Rights, and the Three 2020 Acts: Reorganizing the Land and Titles Court." *Journal of Pacific History* 57 (4): 439–50.
- Meleisea, Leasiolagi Malama, Measina Meredith, Muagututi'a Ioana Chan Mow, Penelope Schoeffel, Semau Ausage Lauano, Hobert Sasa, Ramona Boodoosingh, and Mohammed Sahib. 2015. *Political Representation and Women's Empowerment in Samoa*. Apia: Centre for Samoan Studies.
- Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development [MWCSD]. 2015. *Women Matai and Leadership Survey*. Apia: Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development.
- Motusaga, Mema. 2016. "Women in Decision Making in Samoa." PhD diss. Victoria University.
- Motusaga, Mema. 2021. "The Controversial Use of the Gender Quota in the 2021 Samoan General Election: A Personal Perspective – Part 2." *Department of Pacific Affairs in Brief 2021/17*. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Palmieri, Sonia, Elise Howard, and Kerryn Baker. 2023. "Reframing Suffrage: Pacific Women, Political Voice, and Collective Empowerment." *Journal of Pacific History* 58 (4): 392–411.
- Pa'usisi, Silia Finau. 2019. "Women's Leadership in Samoa." *Pacific-Asian Education* 31: 3–16.
- Radio New Zealand [RNZ] Pacific. 2023. "Samoa Parliament Agrees to Clarify Wording on Women's Seat Quota." *Radio New Zealand Pacific*, March 6.
- Samoa Bureau of Statistics [SBS]. 2022. *Samoa Population and Housing Census 2021*. Apia: Samoa Bureau of Statistics.
- Sanerivi, Sialai Sarafina. 2023. "Valasi Puts Woman MP on the Spot." *Samoa Observer*, October 30.
- Schoeffel, Penelope. 1979. "A Study of Gender, Status and Power in Western Samoa." PhD diss. Australian National University.



- Schoeffel, Penelope, Galemalemana Steven Percival, and Ramona Boodoosingh. 2016. "Samoa." In *Understanding Gender Inequality Actions in the Pacific: Ethnographic Case-studies and Policy Options*, eds. Tony Crook, Sue Farran, and Emilie Röell, 95–107. Luxembourg: European Union.
- Siow, Orlanda. 2018. *Pacific Leadership Program: Advocacy for CEDAW in Tonga*. Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program.
- So'o, Asofou. 2008. *Democracy and Custom in Sāmoa: An Uneasy Alliance*. Suva: IPS Publications.
- So'o, Asofou. 2009. "Samoa." In *Pacific Ways: Government and Politics in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Stephen Levine, 202–11. Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- So'o, Asofou. 2022. "The Constitutionalization of Sāmoan Politics: A Comparison of the 1975, 1982 and 2021 Political Crises." *Journal of Pacific History* 57 (4): 407–23.
- Spark, Ceridwen, and Jack Corbett. 2020. "Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa: Sāmoa's First Female Deputy Prime Minister." *Journal of Pacific History* 55 (4): 453–74.
- Spark, Ceridwen, Jack Corbett, and Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop. 2022. "Tomorrow's Woman?" *Journal of Pacific History* 57 (4): 528–31.
- Sustineo. 2022. *Research on Leadership Pathways of Women in Samoa*. Fiji: UN Women.
- Tabangcora, Beatrice. 2021. "An Analysis of the 2021 Electoral Decisions of the Samoan Courts." *Comparative Law Journal of the Pacific* 26: 107–24.
- Tcherkézoff, Serge. 1998. "Is Aristocracy Good for Democracy? A Contemporary Debate in Western Samoa." In *Pacific Answers to Western Hegemony: Cultural Practices of Identity Construction*, ed. Jürg Wassman, 417–34. Oxford: Berg.
- Tone, Charlina. 2012. "PM Defends Women Bill." *Samoa Observer*, February 8.
- Tuimaleali'ifano, Morgan. 2001. "'Aia Tatau and Afioga Tutasi: 'Aiga versus Tama a 'aiga – Manipulation of Old and New Practices: An MP for Falelatai and Samatau in Samoa's 2001 Elections." *Journal of Pacific History* 36 (3): 317–25.
- Viegas, Susana de Matos, and Rui Feijó. 2017. *Transformations in Independent Timor-Leste: Dynamics of Social and Cultural Cohabitations*. London: Routledge.
- Welsh, Bridget, Kai-Ping Huang, and Yun-han Chu. 2016. "Burma Votes for Change: Clashing Attitudes toward Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 27 (2): 132–40.
- Wolbrecht, Christina, and David E. Campbell. 2007. "Leading by Example: Female Members of Parliament as Political Role Models." *American Journal of Political Science* 51 (4): 921–39.

**Kerryn Baker** is a Fellow in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University: [kerryn.baker@anu.edu.au](mailto:kerryn.baker@anu.edu.au)

**Tuiloma Susana Tauaa** is Professor of Geography at the National University of Samoa: [s.tauaa@nus.edu.ws](mailto:s.tauaa@nus.edu.ws)

**Silafau Sina Vaai** is Professor of English at the National University of Samoa: [s.vaai@nus.edu.ws](mailto:s.vaai@nus.edu.ws)

**Christopher Mudaliar** is a Research Fellow at Swinburne University of Technology: [cmudaliar@swin.edu.au](mailto:cmudaliar@swin.edu.au)

**Michael Leach** is Professor in Politics and International Relations at Swinburne University of Technology: [mleach@swin.edu.au](mailto:mleach@swin.edu.au)

**Julien Barbara** is Associate Professor and Director of the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University: [julien.barbara@anu.edu.au](mailto:julien.barbara@anu.edu.au)

---

**Cite this article:** Baker, Kerryn, Tuiloma Susana Tauaa, Silafau Sina Vaai, Christopher Mudaliar, Michael Leach, and Julien Barbara. 2024. "Tradition Meets Democracy: Perceptions of Women's Political Leadership in Samoa." *Politics & Gender* 20, 936–952. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X2400031X>