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## REVIEW

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Jack Corbett. *Being Political: Leadership and Democracy in the Pacific Islands*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. Pp. xii, 243. ISBN 978-0-8248-4107-7. US\$54.00 hardcover. Notes. Bibliography.

*Reviewed by Lamont Lindstrom, University of Tulsa*

POLITICIANS DESPITE THEIR OCCASIONAL FAULTS can make entertaining conversationalists. Jack Corbett, a research fellow at Griffith University's Centre for Governance and Public Policy, interviewed more than 110 active and retired Pacific politicians. Also, he read through forty some political biographies and autobiographies. Corbett's goal is to humanize his subjects who, if lucky, can be heroized and, if unlucky, demonized. The book hopes "to better understand how politicians in the Pacific Islands see and give meaning to the work they do" (p. ix).

The politicians came from fourteen countries of the postcolonial, English-speaking Pacific. Corbett excluded leaders from New Zealand and Hawai'i and also New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, Northern Marianas, and Easter Island. His 151 sources (interviews and texts combined) provided abundant life narratives to identify generalities in Pacific political careers. Material on female politicians comprised 17 percent of these narratives, reflecting common gender disparities in Pacific politicking.

Notwithstanding an impressive assortment of politicians from Oceania's three subregions Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia, Corbett is able to tease out common themes from diverse careers: how politicians get into the business; their experiences as candidates and representatives; service as legislators and, sometimes, ministers; political motivations and rewards;

and stepping down, defeat, or retirement. Most of Corbett's interviewees went into politics after the heady 1960s–1980s when island colonies gained their independence, and they experience invidious comparison with first-generation leaders whose service spanned the transformation from colony to state. The main political project has shifted from independence to development, and today's leaders find this goal much more difficult to achieve than did their predecessors' drive for independence given the relatively tranquil departure of colonial powers from much of the Pacific. If Corbett had interviewed politicians in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, he would have tapped into politicking where independence remains a goal—although given the longevity or these yet unsuccessful movements, today's leaders are no longer comparable with “first-generation” politicians elsewhere. Alongside “developmentalism,” which typifies much recent political discourse, Corbett also notes in passing the impact of Christian themes and identity that also shape contemporary Pacific politicking.

Second, despite current complaint about corruption and bad governance, Corbett finds that Pacific politicians in general put themselves forward with at least some good intentions to serve their community and their nation. He agrees with other culturally informed observers that much of what is decried as corruption (gifts to voters, nepotism and services to kin, and so forth) are basic elements of Pacific societies themselves, many with compact populations that enjoy face-to-face, overlapping relationships, where boundaries between the “elite” and the people are thin, and where people remain motivated by kinship responsibility.

Third, political parties have become less significant in many Pacific states. Many onetime party organizations that previously united voters from across geographic regions and social groups, when colonies were gaining independence, have splintered or collapsed. Current leaders complain of increased electoral competition even as campaigning has become more expensive and as candidates need to demonstrate greater educational, business, or other useful experience than they once did to win elections.

Corbett briefly mentions several aspects of Pacific politics that could bear additional attention. Many island leaders are bedeviled, one way or the another, by the attention of nongovernmental organizations who come into the Pacific with their own agendas, and also they have to deal with meddling projects, pushed by larger, metropolitan neighbors who are concerned, notably, to give firm instruction on good governance. More personally, many Pacific politicians get fat thanks to the duties and rewards of their positions, as local critics like to point out. Obesity and, one thinks of several examples, an early demise have been fateful political consequences in more than one island nation.

Finally, Corbett remarks the growing importance of social media in the Pacific, particularly in campaigns and in maintaining communication with voters, especially urbanites. Future political scientists will have to scrutinize blogs, Facebook, and Twitter along with personal interviews and published biographies when studying political careers in the Pacific. In the meanwhile, the book ends with a useful appendix that catalogs the 59 politician autobiographies and biographies that Corbett consulted. Only committed political junkies would tackle this list, but thankfully, Corbett has done readers the favor of digesting these for us.