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Popular Political Attitudes in Vanuatu: Findings of the Pacific Attitudes Survey

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of the second *Pacific Attitudes Survey* (PAS), conducted in Vanuatu from August–October 2023. Drawing on a nationally representative sample ($n = 1330$) of ni-Vanuatu of voting-age (18+), the PAS gauges the views of ordinary ni-Vanuatu citizens on a range of questions related to democracy, economics, governance, tradition, climate change, labour mobility and international relations. This article focuses on how ni-Vanuatu understand and participate in democracy, levels of popular trust in institutions, attitudes towards the role of government, the performance of their political system, and women's participation in politics. Findings of the *PAS: Vanuatu* reveal high levels of popular support for democracy and trust in democratic institutions. At the same time, popular political attitudes also highlight a distinctive and widely embraced respect for *kastom* values and traditional leadership, and a popular preference for participating in politics through local and traditional, rather than national pathways.

1 | Popular Political Attitudes Surveys and the Pacific

The *Pacific Attitudes Survey: Vanuatu* is the second large-scale, nationally representative popular political attitudes survey conducted in the Pacific region, and the first in Melanesia.[1] Since the 1980s, nationally-representative, popular political attitudes surveys have been recognised as important tools for political analysis in most regions of the world. Yet the Pacific has remained a notable exception, owing in part to the region's neglect by international survey organisations such as the *Global Barometer* and *World Values Survey*. The reasons for this are perhaps understandable, given the significant practical and cost challenges posed by the region's complex geographies, cultural diversity, and relatively small populations (see Leach,

Barbara, Chan Mow, et al. 2022a, 409–411). [2] It does mean, however, that it is hard to test assumptions, formulate evidence-based policy, and draw empirically grounded conclusions about democracy, political reform, and trust in institutions (see Corbett 2015).

As Baker and Barbara (Baker and Barbara 2020, 135), have argued, for example, the prevailing research focus on formal institutions and political elites fails to consider the ways non-elite Pacific citizens relate to politics in their daily lives. The absence of nationally representative, popular attitudinal datasets has also limited the possibilities for comparative analysis, within and beyond the region, creating a significant limitation in Pacific scholarship on politics, democracy and participation. These factors highlight the need for reliable and comparative datasets on

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popular political attitudes, which can be utilised by policymakers and academics alike.

The *Pacific Attitudes Survey* (PAS) seeks to address this significant data gap. This article draws on findings from the second iteration of the PAS, carried out in Vanuatu in 2023, following the initial survey in Samoa in 2020-21 (see Leach, Barbara, Chan Mow, et al. 2022b). The survey tool draws on core modules from the *Global Barometer Survey* (GBS) to situate results in an internationally comparative context, while also adding a host of new question modules of specific relevance to the Pacific. The *PAS: Vanuatu* was conducted between August and October 2023, coinciding with a volatile period for Vanuatu politics in which two successful votes of no-confidence took place, and leading up to Vanuatu's first national referendum, in May 2024, in which voters approved amendments to the constitution aimed at reducing political instability. In this context, the findings from the survey provide crucial insight into attitudes towards democracy and political participation in contemporary Vanuatu.

2 | The Vanuatu Context

Vanuatu is an archipelagic nation made up of 83 islands with a small, but highly dispersed, population of just over 300,000 (VNSO/SPC 2022). The official languages are Bislama, English and French, with more than 100 local languages also spoken. Most ni-Vanuatu identify as Christian. Like most other Pacific countries, the majority of land in Vanuatu is held under customary tenure (McDonnell and Regenvanu 2022).[3]

Vanuatu is among the most ethno-linguistically diverse countries in the world, with customs and traditions — including the extent of chiefly authority — varying widely from place to place (Lindstrom 1997; Premdas and Steeves 1984). Nevertheless, the idea of *kastom* is central in terms of national identity and, along with Christian principles, creates a unifying framework for Vanuatu as a country. *Kastom* as a concept is inherently ambiguous, relating less to culture in a primordial sense and more to how cultural traditions are reinterpreted in the present (see Keesing 1982). *Kastom* should not be translated into English simply as 'tradition' or 'culture', as it instead encapsulates a holistic way of being (Nimbtik 2016).

Prior to independence in 1980, Vanuatu was co-administered by the French and British through a 'condominium', an unusual arrangement that was criticised for its 'inherent politico-legal contradictions' that led to, among other consequences, statelessness for ni-Vanuatu (Kele-Kele 1977, 17; see also Lightner and Naupa 2005). The legacy of the joint British and French colonial era resulted in parallel education systems and a broad sociolinguistic division between Anglophone and Francophone ni-Vanuatu that has endured in varying forms. Vanuatu at independence faced the formidable challenge of grafting a Western system of parliamentary government onto deep-rooted (and varied) traditional systems of political and cultural organisation (Forsyth 2009). As such, Vanuatu's governance systems combine modern elements with traditional knowledge and values (Naupa 2017; Nimbtik 2016).

The Vanua'aku Party dominated politics for the first decade of independence before splits in the party destabilised it (M. G. Morgan 2008). Since then, coalition-based governments have been the norm, and politics has become more volatile, with frequent realignments and changes of government. The fragmentation of Vanuatu's politics has been both facilitated and reinforced by the country's immense cultural diversity and increasingly localised political cultures (Van Trease 2005). Despite a high rate of government turnover — 2023 saw the appointment of three different prime ministers — there exists a 'robust and resilient' system of checks and balances that places some guardrails around political instability (Forsyth and Batley 2016, 276).

Gender inequality is a persistent issue in Vanuatu, not least in the area of political representation. From independence in 1980–2023, just six women had been elected to parliament. In the 2022 election, one woman was elected to the 52-seat parliament. Key barriers to greater women's representation include social norms that discourage women's participation in decision-making, and a lack of political party support (Ilo-Noka and Dalesa-Saraken 2010; Baker 2018). Reserved seats in the Port Vila and Luganville town councils provide pathways for women at the municipal level, but these measures have not been replicated at the provincial or national levels.

Vanuatu uses a single non-transferable vote electoral system, in which most constituencies are multi-member and voters cast a vote for a single candidate. The system is simple for voters and tends to limit one-party dominance. Instead, it rewards smaller and more localised party structures, which also contributes to fragmentation (M. G. Morgan 2008). Voter turnout has declined substantially over time. In 2022, turnout was fewer than 50% of registered voters (VEC 2022). A 2024 referendum in Vanuatu sought to strengthen political parties by ensuring that MPs who are elected under a political party remain with that party during their time in office. A second amendment mandates that elected independent candidates must join a political party post-election. Both referendum measures passed in May 2024. Despite a history of often unstable coalition governments, Vanuatu is rated 'free' by Freedom House (2024), with relatively high scores for both political rights and civil liberties.

3 | Methods

The *PAS: Vanuatu* was implemented using face-to-face interviews from randomly selected participants ($n = 1330$) of voting age (over the age of 18) (See Supporting Information S1: Appendix 1). Sampling design was clustered, stratified, and multi-staged, with sampling at all stages using probability proportionate to population size and balanced for gender and age. The first level of stratification split Vanuatu into its six provinces (Torba, Sanma, Penama, Malampa, Shefa and Tafea), the second level into districts within each subregion, and the third into villages within each district. 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 Vanuatu. Using 2023 population projections by age group obtained from data within the 2020 National Vanuatu census, the representativeness of the sample required only minor weighting. Participants were given the choice to answer the survey in either Bislama, French or English, with 75% choosing to answer in Bislama or mostly in Bislama.

4 | Survey Findings

Below we outline key findings from the survey modules on national identity, attitudes to democracy, civil liberties and political rights, trust in institutions, political participation, and women's participation in politics. Findings are presented in two ways throughout this article. Descriptive statistics in the form of tables or figures detail the attitudinal responses of the national sample ($n = 1330$).[4] In addition, where relevant, results are disaggregated by gender, age, education, and rural-urban residence, to test for any statistically significant associations between these independent variables and particular attitudes.[5] For example, we examine the data to see if there are significant associations between respondent gender and certain political attitudes.[6] Using these independent variables to deepen the analysis of the national sample is standard in political attitudes surveys.

4.1 | National Identity

The PAS asked ni-Vanuatu participants a range of questions about what they think lies at the heart of their national political community. This included how close they feel to different levels of political communities, where their sense of national identity lies, the focus of their national pride, and what attributes they consider important to being 'truly' ni-Vanuatu.

4.1.1 | Affiliations to Political Community

Respondents were asked to assess their feeling of closeness (or 'emotional attachment') to various levels of political community

in Vanuatu (Figure 1). These included their home village or town, language group, home province or island, and the Melanesian and Pacific regions. Responses were constructed in a Likert-scale as either 'very close', 'close', 'not very close', or 'not close at all'. The purpose of this module is to identify how ni-Vanuatu relate to different levels of political community, and whether there are any significant associations between these attitudes and particular demographic characteristics of respondents.

Echoing findings observed in other parts of the Pacific (Leach et al. 2013, Leach, Barbara, Chan Mow, et al. 2022b), respondents were more likely to feel 'very close' or 'close' to their nation Vanuatu (97.5%) than any other political community. However, respondents were more likely to feel 'very close' to their language group (85.3%) and 'home village' (81.5%) than other political communities.

Age and location played a role in how different socio-demographic groups related to their political community. For instance, though responses were strong across all age groups, younger ni-Vanuatu (18–29) were significantly less likely to feel 'very close' to their home village or town (75.1%), language group (80.3%), and province or home island (71.5%) than were senior (60+) ni-Vanuatu to home village or town (91.2%); language group (94.5%); and home island (88.4%). There was, however, no significant association between respondent age and feelings of closeness to Vanuatu as a whole.

Rural respondents were significantly more likely to feel 'very close' to their home village (87%), language group (89.5%) and home island (83.5%) when compared to urban respondents. Despite this difference, urban respondents still expressed significant levels of closeness to their home communities, feeling 'very close' to their home villages (65.6%), home islands (66.2%) and especially their language groups (74.3%). In urban areas like Port Vila, those who belong to the same language group often reside within the same vicinity and maintain close links within their home community.

4.1.2 | National Identity Indicators

Common understandings of national identity play a key role in unifying political communities and cultural groups under one
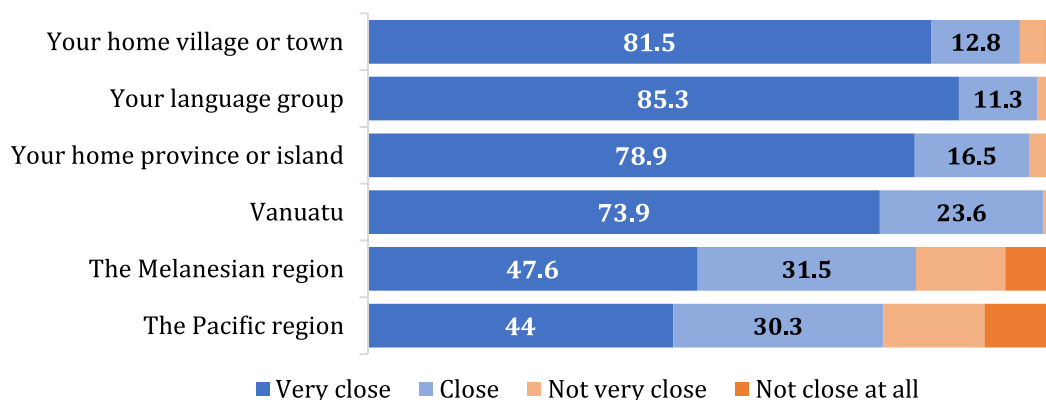

	Very close	Close	Not very close	Not close at all
Your home village or town	81.5	12.8		
Your language group	85.3	11.3		
Your home province or island	78.9	16.5		
Vanuatu	73.9	23.6		
The Melanesian region	47.6	31.5		
The Pacific region	44	30.3		

FIGURE 1 | Degree of attachment to differing levels of political community in Vanuatu (%).

common national umbrella. The PAS asked respondents about the importance of certain attributes to being 'truly ni-Vanuatu'.[7] These indicators test the relative strength of *civic* (or 'voluntarist') conceptions of national identity (which emphasise voluntary attachments to the nation, such as respect for political institutions and laws, 'feeling' ni-Vanuatu or having ni-Vanuatu citizenship); and *ethnic* (or 'objectivist') understandings of national identity (which emphasise features individuals are less able to choose, such as notions of common descent and culture, being born in Vanuatu, being able to speak Bislama, being Christian or having Melanesian ancestors). Respondents rated their responses to these questions as 'very important', 'fairly important', 'not very important' or 'not at all important' (Figure 2).

Respondents attached high levels of importance to each of these national identity indicators as markers of being 'truly' ni-Vanuatu, except for significantly lower values found for the ability to speak English and French. Notably, civic indicators like 'to respect Vanuatu's political institutions and laws' (94.1% very important), 'to have ni-Vanuatu citizenship' (94.2%), and 'to feel ni-Vanuatu' (87.5%) were matched by objectivist indicators like 'to respect *kastom*' (95.3%), 'to practise *kastom*' (94.1%), 'to be Christian' (89.8%), and 'to have been born in Vanuatu' (94%). On average, civic/voluntarist and ethnic/objectivist indicators were valued relatively equally by respondents.[8]

Findings therefore reveal the comparable importance of 'modern' indicators—such as 'to respect political institutions and law', and 'to be a citizen'—and more 'traditional' notions of political community, such as respect for *kastom* and tradition. This is an instructive finding that indicates the ongoing importance of *kastom* in national life. Notably, rural respondents (90%) were significantly more likely to regard 'to have lived in Vanuatu for most of one's life' to be 'very important' to being truly ni-Vanuatu, than were urban respondents (79%). Self-reported language fluency also proved a strong factor in questions concerning the importance of the official languages for being considered 'truly ni-Vanuatu'. Those who considered themselves fluent in either Bislama, English or French were significantly more likely to consider fluency in the corresponding language as 'very important' to being 'truly ni-Vanuatu'. This finding reinforces the importance of language instruction to prevailing conceptions of national identity.

4.1.3 | National Pride

A further set of survey questions asked respondents about their level of national pride in relation to various aspects of Vanuatu's politics, history and culture (Figure 3).

Results reflected high levels of national pride across every indicator. Notably, pride in Vanuatu's history, and the country's distinctive *kastom* and culture returned the strongest results in terms of total pride ('very proud' and 'proud' combined: 99%). Notable also are the lower levels of pride in 'the way democracy works' (81.8% 'very proud'). This indicates that the key strengths of Vanuatu nationalism lie less in the capacity of the state, and more in wider popular affiliations to society, culture and national history.

Another aspect of understanding national identity lies in the profound and continuing importance of local cultures. While culture was found to be a key object of national pride, the very idea of culture nonetheless remains firmly associated with local, rather than national, communities. Accordingly, in another
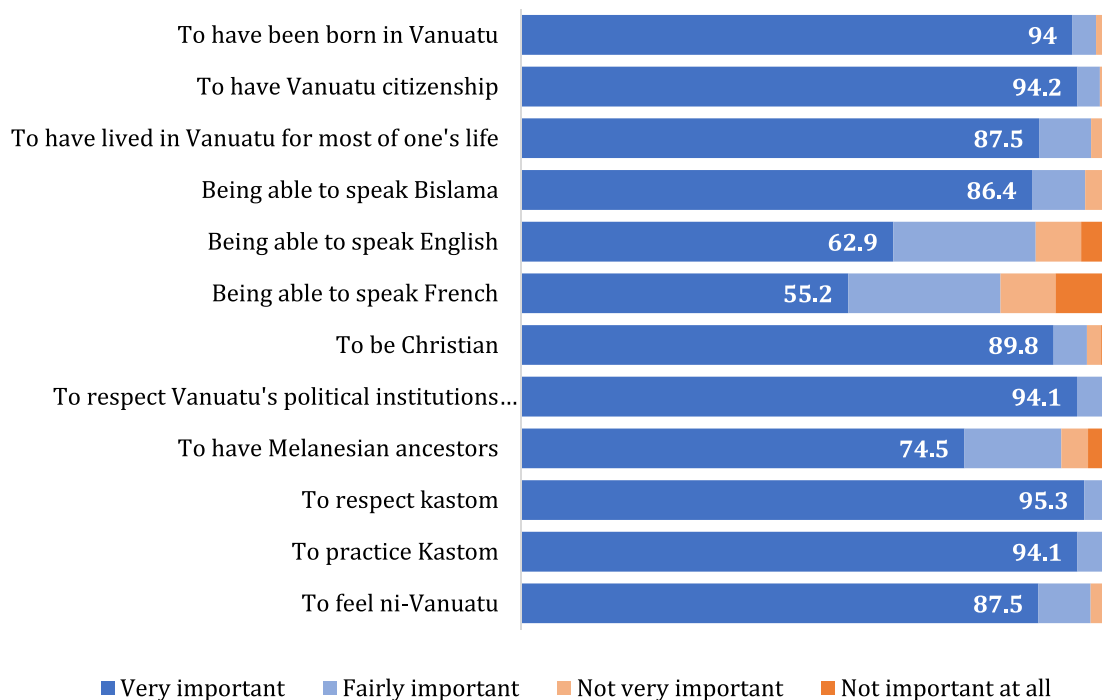

FIGURE 2 | Some people say the following things are important for being truly ni-Vanuatu. Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is (%).

question, 79.6% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'it is better if groups maintain their distinct languages, and *kastom*', compared with 19.5% who chose the alternative of 'it is better if these groups adapt and blend into one society.'

4.2 | Attitudes to Democracy

The *PAS* asked a range of questions to gain understanding of how ni-Vanuatu understand democracy and its value to their society, and how they rate its performance as a political system when compared to authoritarian alternatives.

4.2.1 | Support for Democracy

The PAS gauged respondents' preference for democracy as opposed to authoritarian alternatives (Figure 4). This question is one of the most extensively used indicators for measuring popular support for democracy globally (see e.g., Welsh et al. 2016). Overall, 76% of ni-Vanuatu respondents agreed that 'democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government'. By contrast, 16.9% of respondents selected 'under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one'. Just 6.1% 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 'in-principle' popular support for democracy. No significant demographic associations (e.g., with age, gender or education levels) were found in relation to preference for democracy or authoritarian rule, suggesting this is a relatively unifying position across a range of societal groups in Vanuatu.

4.2.2 | Satisfaction With Democracy

Typically, popular political attitudes surveys (e.g., Huang and Weatherall 2018) divide popular support for democracy into two types. These are best understood as ideal-based and performance-based models of support for democracy. Essentially, these models test whether people support democracy because democratic values and procedures are considered inherently valuable, and superior to alternatives (ideal-based support); or because democracy currently delivers good results, such as development or economic growth (performance-based support). Having assessed how respondents feel about democratic governance 'in-principle' above, the PAS then asked respondents to reflect on how Vanuatu's democracy performs 'in-practice' (Figure 5).

A total of 84.5% of ni-Vanuatu reported that they were either 'fairly satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with 'the way democracy
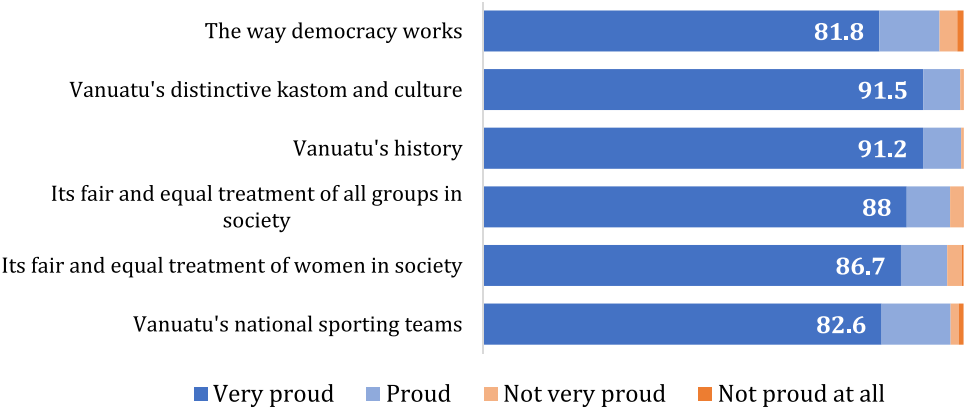

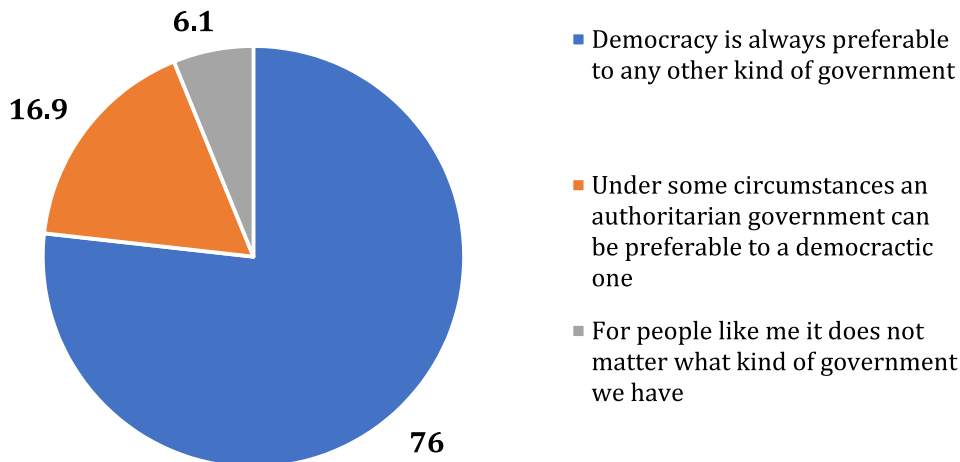**FIGURE 3** | How proud are you of vanuatu in the following (%).

FIGURE 4 | 'Which of the following statements come closest to your own opinion?' (%).
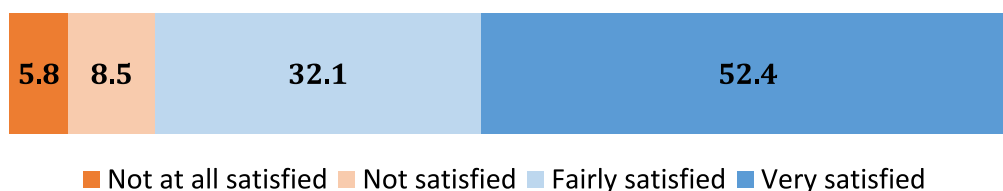
FIGURE 5 | 'On the whole how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Vanuatu?' (%).

works in Vanuatu', compared with 14.4% who were 'not at all satisfied' or 'not satisfied'. Cross-tab analysis was then used to assess demographic factors associated with democratic satisfaction. Notably, rural respondents were significantly more likely to be 'very satisfied' (57.3%) with how democracy works in Vanuatu when compared to urban respondents (38.7%).

Elsewhere in the democratic world, satisfaction with democracy tends to rise and fall with the economic performance of the country (Huang and Weatherall 2018, 24). The PAS also asked respondents to evaluate the overall economic condition of Vanuatu. Notably, those rating the overall economic condition of the country positively were significantly more likely to report satisfaction with 'the way democracy works in Vanuatu' (92%) than those who rated the economic condition negatively (81%).

4.2.3 | Civil Liberties and Separation of Powers

The PAS also sought to gauge respondent perceptions of the suite of civil and political rights associated with well-functioning liberal democracies, and popular understandings of the separation of powers. Responses indicate a strong popular recognition that Vanuatu promotes fundamental civil liberties and political rights, such as freedom of speech and assembly. An overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that people can say what they think (93.6%) or join organisations they like (92.3%), without fear.

There was broad popular appreciation of the separation of powers, and the ability of courts to hold governments to account, with a majority (83.6%) disagreeing with the proposition that 'when the government breaks the law, there is nothing the legal system can do'. Likewise, a majority of respondents (53.3%) rejected the notion that judges 'should follow the views of government' when deciding important cases. In the case of invoking government emergency powers 'when the country is facing a difficult situation', however, responses were evenly divided, with 47% agreeing that it is 'okay for the government to ignore the law to deal with it'.

4.2.4 | Role of Government in Democracy

Following a robust endorsement of civil liberties and checks on executive power, noted above, a further series of questions then assessed the degree to which respondents held a 'bottom up' conception of popular sovereignty, or a more 'top-down' view of government as a guardian of society.

In these responses a majority of respondents believed the media 'should have the right to publish new ideas without government control' (63.4%), rather than the alternate position that 'government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that might be harmful to society' (36.6%). A narrower majority agreed that 'the government is our employee; the people should tell the government what needs to be done' (55%), rather than 'the government is like a parent, it should decide what is good for us' (44%). Respondents were relatively evenly split on their views of the relationship between government and people, with 50.2% believing that 'government leaders do what they think is best for the people', while 48.5% believed that 'government leaders implement what the voters want'. Averaged over the three questions, respondents (55.6%) slightly favoured a conception of government that takes direction from the demands of its citizens. Also notable, though more contested, was the popular rejection of government's role in limiting discussion of certain ideas. In Vanuatu, 51.3% of respondents disagreed with the notion that 'the government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society'. In Samoa this result was very different, with respondents agreeing (81.5%) that the government should be able to limit discussion of certain ideas (Leach, Barbara, Chan Mow, et al. 2022b, 14).

4.2.5 | Parties and Political Change

Respondents also displayed high levels of confidence that 'people have the power to change a government they do not like' (80.9%). This is especially remarkable given that the survey was conducted in a period of political instability in which the government changed twice through votes of no-confidence. It is also interesting in the context of declining voter turnout rates, with fewer than half of all registered voters casting a ballot in the 2022 Vanuatu general elections.

On political parties, respondents were split between those who believe 'political parties are suitable for our system of government' (56.6%) and those who do not (40.7%). As we will see below, popular trust in political parties as institutions is also relatively low, when compared with other political institutions in Vanuatu. This may reflect Vanuatu's now highly factionalised and fluid party setting (Van Trease 2005), characterised more by loose coalitions of often disparate groups. It may also reflect the localised nature of electoral campaigning in Vanuatu.

Despite strong support for democracy in principle, the findings revealed a widespread sense among ni-Vanuatu that politics was complicated and hard to follow. A large majority (84.1%) of respondents believe that 'politics seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on'. The

complexity of following politics in Vanuatu is perhaps reinforced by its high level of political instability, with governments often made up of loose and fragile coalitions who are unable to maintain power for consistent periods. This political instability helps explain the positive result of the 2024 referendum on reforming and strengthening the party system in order to reduce the frequency of MPs forcing a change in government through crossing the floor.

4.2.6 | The Role of Tradition

Following on from the above, the PAS asked respondents further questions related to the role of *kastom* and democratic principles. When asked whether 'it is important to respect *kastom* even if it goes against the law', some 90% of respondents agreed. The statement that 'government should recognise the traditional way of doing things' elicited even greater total agreement from respondents (98.6%). Notably, rural respondents were significantly more likely to strongly agree (86.1%) that the government 'should recognise the traditional way of doing things', compared to urban respondents (72.6%).

The strong role of *kastom* as a source of political legitimacy reflects broader literature on the powerful influence of *kastom* on life in Vanuatu (see Nimbtik 2016). It is also potentially explained in part by the relatively weak reach of the state in Vanuatu, particularly in more remote areas. In lieu of extensive contact with the state, chiefs play an important role in local governance.

In terms of political practice, however, there is strong popular recognition of the ways in which democratic and customary institutions are entwined in Vanuatu's political system. Almost three-quarters (73.6%) of respondents agreed that 'our system of government works well because it blends modern and traditional elements'. There was also significant support for the statement 'traditional leaders should have a greater say in politics than ordinary people' (73.8%). This was reinforced with a strong majority of respondents agreeing that the government should consult the 'Church' (91.1%) and the Malvatumauri[9] (94%) when making laws. On the other hand, responses to the proposition that 'only *kastom* leaders should be able to run for parliament' were more starkly divided with only 45.3% agreement. Gender proved to be a significant factor in these responses. Men were more likely to strongly agree (81%) that the Malvatumauri should be consulted when making laws compared to women (69%). Older respondents (81%) were also more likely to strongly agree with the same proposition, compared to youth (70%). Rural respondents (78%) were likewise significantly more likely to strongly agree, compared to urban residents (65%). Considered as a whole, these results are indicative of the way traditional systems and notions of legitimacy have been intertwined in modern democratic institutions in Vanuatu.

4.2.7 | Leadership Attributes

Customary leaders and chiefs play an important role in local communities, dealing with disputes and other local matters, and provide a contact point between local communities and the state. In Vanuatu, political leadership must be understood in a context in which 'unique and localised systems of community governance and dispute resolution remain central to people's lives, alongside introduced models of church leadership and even more recent systems of state government' (W. Morgan 2013, (1). In this respect, contemporary models of state leadership and accountability coexist alongside systems of *kastom* governance which draw on localised traditional and religious practices (Nimbtik 2016; Denney et al. 2023). Leadership at local and national levels therefore involves different roles and tasks and relies on different leadership qualities and sources of legitimation. The PAS asked a number of questions about leadership in Vanuatu (Figure 6).

Respondents prioritised different leadership attributes for chiefs and parliamentarians. For instance, respondents were more likely to rate having 'the right family background' as being very important for chiefs (70%), while only 58.2% considered it very important for members of parliament. Similarly, a village chief's 'traditional rank and knowledge of *kastom*' was more commonly rated as very important (87%) when compared to MPs (73.5%). On the other hand, 'being chosen by the people' and 'their education and qualifications' was overwhelmingly considered 'very important' for MPs (87.5% and 84.6% respectively), but significantly less so for village chiefs (71.1% and 60.8% respectively). Both 'performance in the job' and 'what they do for me and my family' was rated almost equally for village chiefs and MPs, reflecting the strong performative expectations on political leaders in Vanuatu.

Taken together, the PAS findings on democracy reveal a unique combination of endorsement for Vanuatu's democratic institutions, along with a significant level of popular regard for customary institutions, reflective of the hybridised nature of the Vanuatu state. There is also a relatively popular view that government should take direction from citizens, rather than leading in a 'top-down' manner. However, this relationship is moderated at a local level, where respondents express stronger preferences for traditional leaders to speak on their behalf. This indicates that within Vanuatu there are dual perspectives on how democracy is perceived, both at national and local levels.

4.3 | Ni-Vanuatu Attitudes to Government

4.3.1 | What Ni-Vanuatu Want From the Government and Their MPs

The PAS sought to understand the expectations and priorities of ni-Vanuatu in terms of their government and national representatives. When asked 'what are the top three most important problems facing this country that government should address', economics (18.7%), infrastructure (15.8%) and government services (14.9%) were the three biggest areas of concern for respondents.[10] Two thirds (67.6%) of respondents indicated confidence that their identified problem 'will be solved within the next 5 years'. This reflects the broad level of popular satisfaction with the current national government—77% overall—a notable and somewhat surprising result given the context of

political instability in which the survey data collection took place.

The PAS then asked respondents which aspects of the job they believe their MP currently focuses on, alongside the aspects of the job respondents think their MP *should* be focusing on (Figure 7).

These results suggest that ni-Vanuatu citizens want their MP to spend more time on helping community projects over promoting national development. Scholars have argued that there is a 'Melanesian political culture [that] draws the attention of MPs

away from their institutional responsibilities as lawmakers and overseers of government' (M. Morgan 2005, 12). On the question of what their MP currently focuses on the most, 'promoting national development' (23.3%) was the most common answer. In terms of what respondents believe that their MP *should* be doing, however, the most common answer was 'helping community projects' (35%), revealing a substantial gap with respondent perceptions of their current activities. While there were no significant differences between demographic groups on the question of what their MP currently does, rural respondents felt more strongly that MPs should 'help community projects' (40.1%) than did their urban counterparts (29.4%).
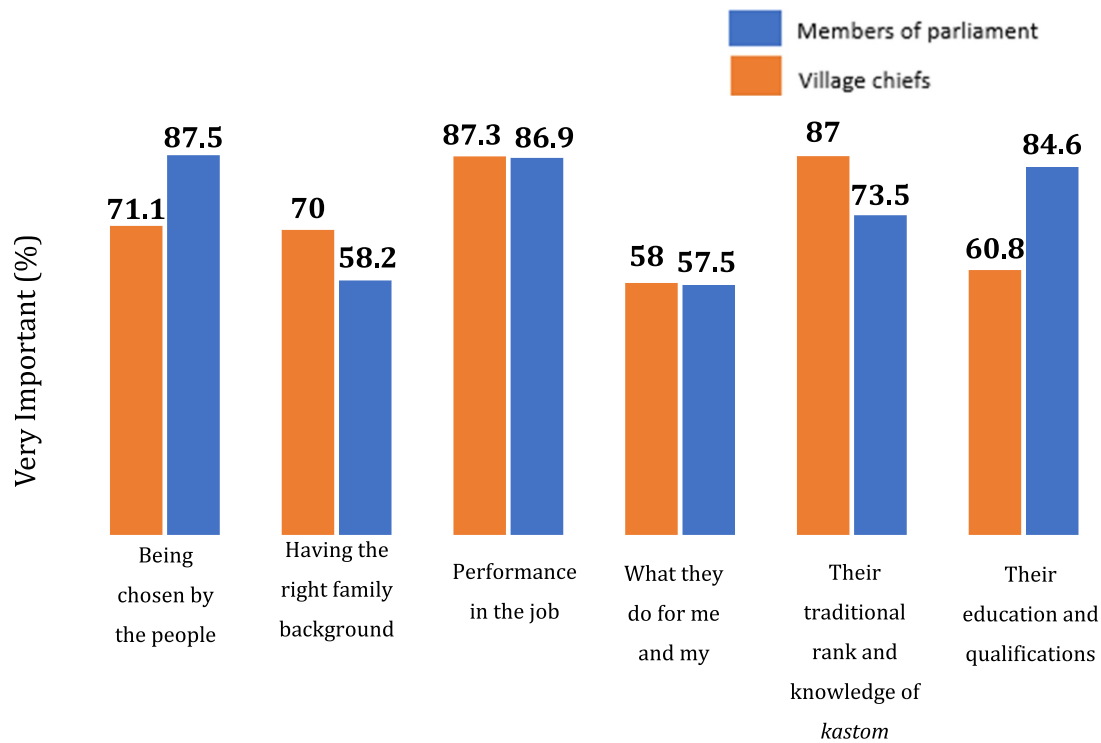

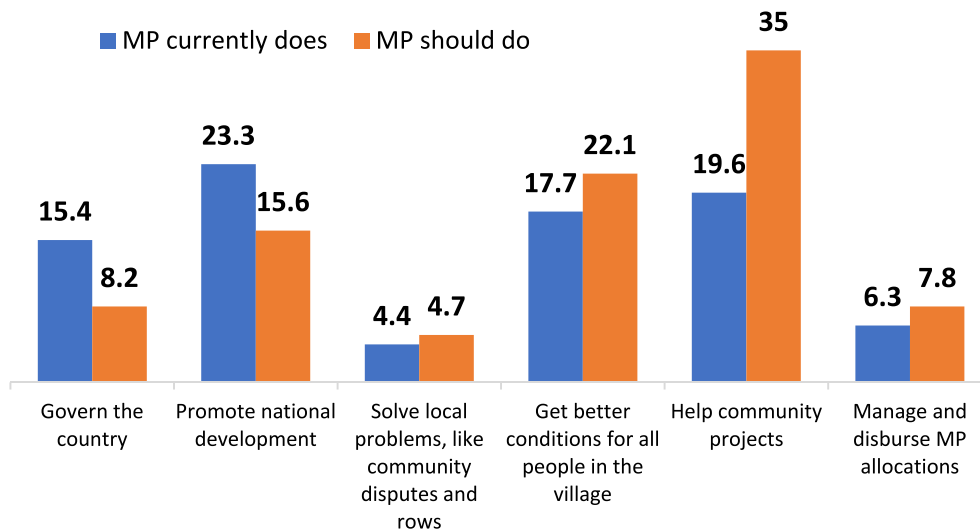**FIGURE 6** | Attributes of a good leader (%)—'How important are the following to make a good leader?'.

FIGURE 7 | Focus of MPs' job—'There are many parts of an MP's job. Which of the following jobs do you think your MP currently focuses on the most?'[11] and: 'Which of the following jobs *should* they focus on the most?' (%).

4.4 | Trust in Institutions

The PAS then assessed trust in a range of institutions, categorised into three types. The first are elected institutions, such as the parliament. The second group is the non-elected branches of government, such as the courts or civil service. This distinction is important because in theory, citizens' trust towards elected institutions tends to be reflective of government reputation, while trust in non-elected institutions tends to be an evaluation of state capacity (Huang and Weatherall 2018, 63). Our third category, distinctive to the PAS, seeks to evaluate trust in traditional institutions.[12] Figure 8 shows the various levels of trust in different institutions. Table 1 groups these into elected (the prime minister, parliament, the national government, municipal and provincial administration), non-elected (the courts, public service, the police and Vanuatu Mobile Force),[13] and traditional categories (church leaders, chiefs and the Malvatumauri).

Findings indicate that respondents placed higher levels of trust in traditional institutions (95%), followed by non-elected (94%) and then elected institutions (85%).

The relatively higher levels of trust placed in traditional and non-elected institutions are notable. While trust in elected institutions in Vanuatu is high, levels of popular trust appear to reflect their greater propensity to change and instability. This factor was especially strong in relation to political parties. While our survey found generally high levels of trust in institutions, political parties proved to be the least trusted institution in Vanuatu (73.5%). On the other hand, the high levels of popular trust placed in non-elected institutions seem to signify a strong understanding of the separation of powers in Vanuatu. For instance, the court system was seen as highly trustworthy when compared to political parties, the prime minister and parliament. Throughout Vanuatu's political history, the High Court has often played a key role in adjudicating political disputes that prompt government turnover (see Forsyth and Batley 2016).

4.5 | Political Participation and Engagement

A vibrant democracy relies on politically engaged citizens. The PAS asked a range of questions to better understand forms of political participation in Vanuatu. This section examines popular attitudes to issues of political participation, including levels of interest in politics, perceptions of leadership qualities at different levels of government, attitudes to the participation of women, forms of political engagement by citizens, and attitudes to different modes of dispute resolution.

When asked 'how interested would you say you are in politics', 67.1% of respondents reported some level of interest. Table 2 breaks this down into different demographic groups. We found a strong positive correlation between age of the respondents, and their reported interested in politics. For example, where 60% of respondents aged 18–29 were interested in politics, this figure rose to 80.2% for those aged 60+. Similar findings were evident when responses were disaggregated by gender, with men (78.3%) significantly more likely to be interested in politics compared to women (55.8%). The reasons for this are likely to be the same as for younger people: that is, women feel less connected to political life as a result of traditional limitations. This finding reflects similar outcomes globally (Huang and Weatherall 2018, 55).

When asked how often they discuss political matters with friends or family members, 15.6% of respondents selected 'frequently', while 54.6% reported 'occasionally' discussing political matters, and 29.3% reported 'never' discussing political matters. Older ni-Vanuatu were more likely to discuss political issues with friends or family. Seniors (25.3%) reported 'frequently' discussing politics with friends or family at significantly higher rates than youth (10.3%). Similarly, women were significantly less likely to discuss politics than men. For instance, where 79.8% of men discussed politics frequently or occasionally with friends or family, for women this number dropped to 60.2%.
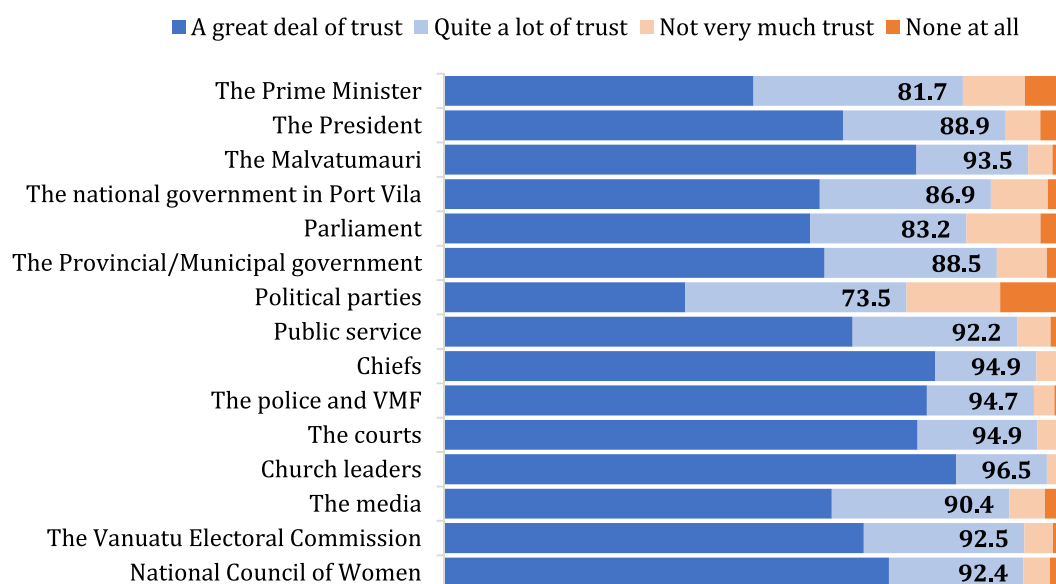

FIGURE 8 | How much trust do you place in the following? (%).

The PAS then asked whether respondents had engaged a range of forms of political action in the previous 3 years (Table 3). Notably, respondents were most likely to have 'got together with others to try to resolve local problems' at least once (54.6%) compared to other forms of political participation.

Other findings also suggest a majority of respondents surveyed engaged with politics in more direct and localised ways (Table 4).

Respondents reported substantially higher levels of engagement with village chiefs and church leaders in dealing with local problems, than with MPs or government officials. Some 60.4% of respondents reported contacting their village chief at least once in the previous 3 years because of local problems, with contact with church leaders higher at 62%. Notably, these institutions were also found to have significantly higher levels of trust placed in them as discussed above. Respondents reported they had not contacted government officials (72.3%), MPs (73.9%) or NGOs (77.9%) concerning local problems in the last 3 years.

There were significant cohort effect across both political participation measures (Figure 9). Men were significantly more likely to have engaged in all forms of political participation compared to women. As noted above, women are less likely to engage with politics than men across all the measures surveyed: joining political parties, protesting, talking about politics with friends and family, and contacting leaders about local issues, among other indicators.

4.6 | Women in Politics

Findings suggest that there is overall strong support for strong women's representation, in principle. When asked about women's representation in Vanuatu's parliament, 82.5% of respondents believed there were 'too few' women represented in parliament. Another 12.8% thought the current number of women MPs (1) was 'just right', while 2.5% felt that was 'too many'. There was also widespread support (87%) for the use of temporary special measures (or gender quotas) in parliament. In terms of demographic differences, senior ni-Vanuatu were more likely to strongly agree (72%) that there should be temporary special measures to increase women's representation in parliament, compared to youth (60.6%).

There was also strong majority support for women to play an active role in government. Notably, 86.1% of respondents felt 'women should be involved in politics as much as men'. This finding was reflected in strong agreement (73.6%) that 'a woman should become Prime Minister of our country'. Roughly the same level of support extended to the president with 69.6% agreeing that 'a woman should become President of our country'. At the time of data collection in 2023, there had never been a woman prime minister or president of Vanuatu.

While popular attitudes to women's participation in politics were generally positive, there were nonetheless mixed responses to the proposition that 'in general men are better at political leadership than women', with some 54.6% expressing agreement. This

TABLE 1 | Trust in institutions... %.

	A great deal of trust	Quite a lot of trust	Total trust	Not very much trust	None at all
Elected	57	28	**85**	10	4
Non-elected	73	21	**94**	4	2
Traditional	79	16	**95**	4	1

Note: Total trust = combined totals of 'A great deal of trust' and 'quite a lot of trust'.

TABLE 2 | Gender and age interest in politics (%).

|	Very interested	Somewhat interested	Total interest	Not very interested	Not at all interested
Men	36.1	42.2	**78.3**	8.7	12.7
Women	18.6	37.2	**55.8**	12.7	30.9
Youth (18–29)	19	41.1	**60**	11.6	27.6
Adult (30–59)	29.7	38.8	**68.5**	10.9	20.3
Senior (60+)	41.2	39	**80.2**	7.7	11.5

Note: Total interest = combined totals of 'very interested' and 'somewhat interested'.

TABLE 3 | Have you done any of these things in the past 3 years? ... (%).

	Never done	Once	More than once
Got together with others to try to resolve local problems	45.1	18.4	36.2
Talked to your MP	64.7	15.3	19.8
Signed a petition	79.8	8.4	11.4
Joined an NGO or advocacy group	78.1	8.1	13.5
Attended a demonstration or protest march	81.7	8.3	9.9
Joined a political party	57.4	17.6	24.9

TABLE 4 | Have you done any of these things in the past 3 years because of local problems?...(%).

	Never done	Once	More than once
Contacted village chief	39.4	21.3	39.1
Contacted government official	72.3	10.6	17.1
Contacted church leaders	37.9	18.3	43.7
Contacted your MP	73.9	11	15.3
Contacted NGO or civil society groups	77.9	8.7	13.3
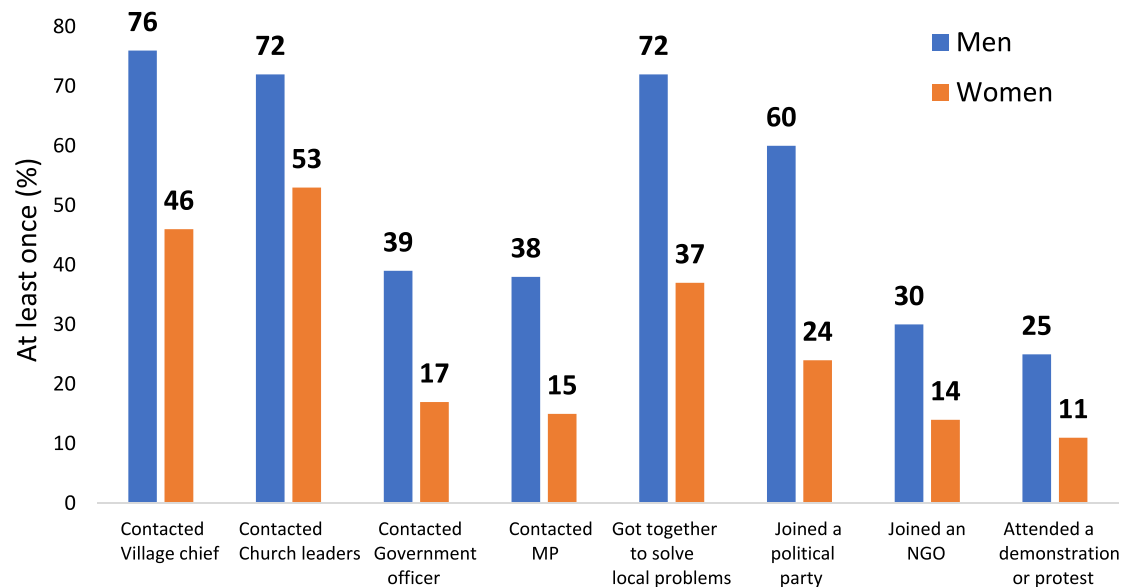
FIGURE 9 | Gender and political participation—'Have you done the following because of local problems?' (%).

suggests that while most respondents agreed in principle with the idea of greater women's representation in politics, social norms of leadership still favour men. This seems to be especially true in more traditional political spaces, with 62.2% of respondents (66.2% of men and 58.2% of women) agreeing that women should not speak in the *nakamal* (traditional meeting place where chiefs convene).

Taken together, these results paint a picture of unequal political access and participation for women. While there is strong theoretical support for greater women's representation, including in the most senior political leadership positions, there are also strong social norms at play that prioritise men's leadership at family, community and political levels. In this context, women are less likely to stand for and win elected political positions; however, the effect goes further, with women also less likely to engage in political activity generally.

5 | Conclusion

The findings of the *PAS: Vanuatu* detail a complex picture of political and social attitudes, with a distinctive mix of democratic and traditional values in Vanuatu's political culture. They reflect strong support for both civic and ethnic markers of national identity, and high degree of national pride. They emphasise that ni-Vanuatu are strongly supportive of democracy, and also

satisfied with the way democracy performs in practice. This finding, in the context of a relatively unstable political system, provides an interesting contrast with declining rates of satisfaction with democracy in recent election studies in neighbouring Australia (see Cameron and McAllister 2019). It is also interesting in light of global trends towards the rise of illiberalism, populism and democratic recession (Diamond 2015).

Democratic engagement is nuanced in Vanuatu, however, and survey findings also elucidated a sense of disconnect between what voters want from their representatives, and what representatives currently do,. They highlighted that ni-Vanuatu citizens engage with politics more strongly through local and traditional, rather than national, pathways. Reported rates of political participation were consistently higher at local levels, across all demographic groups. This aligns with observations on the localisation of politics both within Vanuatu (Van Trease 2005) and in its Melanesian neighbours (Kurer 2006; Wood 2014), and suggests more could be done to strengthen citizen connections to the state and enhance national-level political participation.

There are also noticeable inequalities in access to politics, with women far less likely to participate in both formal and traditional political spaces than men, reflecting Global Barometer findings (see Huang and Weatherall 2018). Intergenerational changes were also evident, with older generations more likely to participate in politics and to exert political influence than younger generations. While respondents demonstrated widespread

support for greater women's representation in politics in principle, the survey highlighted that social norms of political leadership still favour men. This echoes recent research on voter motivations in Vanuatu elections (see Toa et al. 2024), and supports their recommendation of broad voter education programming that targets social norm change.

The absence of nationally representative popular perspectives in the Pacific Islands is a significant gap that has to date limited our understanding of politics and society in the region. Accounting for popular perceptions of democracy and other important issues has the potential to challenge accepted wisdoms, and open up new possibilities for scholarly debate and public policy engagement. Ensuring Pacific data is included in global conversations on popular attitudes can also combat the marginalisation of the region. The *PAS: Vanuatu* marks the second iteration of a survey project that is intended to grow to cover the entire Pacific region, to contribute to closing these data gaps, and ensuring the region is part of these global debates.

Ethics Statement

This research complies with the guidelines set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)—Updated 2018.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] The Pacific Attitudes Survey: Vanuatu project was a partnership between The Australian National University, Swinburne University of Technology, the University of the South Pacific and the National University of Vanuatu. The first Pacific Attitudes Survey was conducted in Samoa (see Leach, Barbara, Chan Mow, et al. 2022a).

[2] Where attitudinal surveys have been conducted in the Pacific region, they have tended to be relatively narrow in scope, with one notable exception being the RAMSI People's Surveys in Solomon Islands (RAMSI 2010, 2011, 2013). There are a number of attitudes surveys on specific issues including labour mobility (Doan et al. 2023), justice systems (Putt and Dinnen 2023) and corruption (Kukutschka 2021).

[3] Under customary tenure, land is owned by Indigenous individuals and groups and 'managed by customary institutions governed by chiefs, or councils of chiefs, that determine use and access rights over an area of land in accordance with customary principles' (McDonnell

and Regenvanu 2022). Customary land cannot be alienated but may be leased.

[4] Percentages obtained from the total sample ($n = 1330$) are reported with an accuracy of better than 2.75 per cent with 95 per cent confidence. Completion rates for individual questions were generally greater than 98 per cent, allowing non-response categories of 'decline to answer', 'can't choose', and 'don't know' to be ignored in this report, except where noted.

[5] We adopt a two-step convention for reporting any differences in attitudes across socio-demographic groups: first, the associations must be statistically significant at $p < 0.05$; and second, we adopt the protocol that these must result in substantial differences in excess of 10 per cent to merit discussion. A significance level of less than 1 per cent is used throughout for identifying significant relationships. This means there is a less than 1 per cent chance a reported association is a random occurrence.

[6] This module was initially adapted from the International Social Survey Programme (with permission) for survey work among tertiary students in Timour-Leste (see Leach 2003, 2008).

[7] In percentage terms, 'objectivist' indicators were considered 'very important' by an average 86 per cent of respondents, compared to 92 per cent for 'voluntarist' measures.

[8] Here, 'the Church' is defined broadly and without reference to a specific organisation or institution (reflecting the diversity of Christian denominations in Vanuatu) whereas 'the Malvatumauri' refers specifically to the constitutionally enshrined council of chiefs.

[9] This question was a write-in response, and individual responses were then coded and categorised. The category of economics included issues related to unemployment, wages and income, economic management, taxes and poverty. The category of infrastructure including issues related to roads and transport as well as communications. Government services included issues related to education and housing, as well as inter-island services.

[10] A high proportion of respondents chose not to answer this question (13 per cent). Post survey debriefs with enumerators revealed this was mainly because such respondents reported that their MP 'does nothing'.

[11] Trust in institutions is divided into two components by the Global Barometer Surveys network of surveys. The addition of traditional institutions in the *Pacific Attitudes Survey* is, to our knowledge, unique to popular attitudes surveys. We acknowledge that Vanuatu, like other Pacific states, has hybrid institutions that do not fit neatly into categories such as elected, non-elected and traditional, and as such there is some overlap.

[12] The police and Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF) are combined here as they sit under the same institutional umbrella; however, they have been separated at various times in Vanuatu's history.

[13] These figures reflect the combined totals of 'quite a lot of trust' and 'a great deal of trust', and are averages across the three category groups

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.