**Effects of legislative electoral process and fiscal restrictions**

**on citizen perceptions of the Guam Senate**

**Michael J. Stoil**

**Associate Professor of Political Science**

**University of Guam**

**Mary Therese Cruz**

**Assistant Professor of Political Science**

**University of Guam**

Abstract

This presentation focuses on the unusual electoral process for the Guam legislature and its potential impact on perceptions of the legislature among the indigenous Chamorru population. All 15 seats of the unicameral Guam legislature are elected biennially in a simultaneous territorial at-large election in which each voter can cast votes for up to 15 candidates of either political party.  It is hypothesized that this system encourages candidates—even of the same party—to run against each other as individuals. At the same time, the inability of the Guam legislature to effectively determine the territorial government’s revenue or to prioritize spending frustrates the adoption of coherent policy positions by the two political parties or by groups of candidates within the parties.  It is proposed that these two factors contribute to legislative elections being fought as individual candidate popularity contests rather than as choices in alternative policy directions, and discourages the belief among the electorate that local democracy can produce substantive change. These hypotheses are examined through candidate interviews and voter survey results.

In the fall of 1813, the ongoing private correspondence between former Presidents Thomas Jefferson and John Adams turned to the subject of the types of individuals most likely to be elected to the legislatures and other public offices. Jefferson wrote that democratic elections, especially among an educated population, will ensure the rise of what he described as a “natural aristocracy.”

The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society. And indeed it would have been inconsistent in creation to have formed man for the social state, and not to have provided virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of the society. May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural *aristoi* into the offices of government?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Adams’ agreed that “natural aristocrats” were likely to dominate the deliberations of a democratic state, but cautioned against assuming that the result would necessarily be wisdom and virtue in the offices of government. Instead,

Education, Wealth, Strength, Beauty, Stature, Birth, Marriage, graceful Attitudes and Motions, Gait, Air, Complexion, Physiognomy, are Talents, as well as Genius and Science and learning. Any one of these Talents, that in fact commands or influences true Votes in Society, gives to the Man who possesses it, the Character of an Aristocrat, in my Sense of the Word.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In effect, Adams argued that it was entirely possible that the traits which lead to the choice of successful candidates for legislative office might have little or nothing to do with the wisdom or virtue that democratic theory assumes will emerge from election contests.

The debate on the nature of traits that attract electoral support has continued in the United States for the past 200 years. The Jeffersonian ideal remains that a reasonably well-educated public will choose legislators who reflect the voters’ perception of the best interests of the community. Presumably these legislators will campaign on the basis of their demonstrated experience, their record of probity, and the match between their policy priorities and the needs of the community. A more pragmatic view, reinforced by data from behaviorist research, adheres to Adams’ observation that personal traits of the candidates less closely related to their qualities as legislators influence the voters’ decisions. Although policy considerations remain influential, they are said to appear more frequently in the voters’ party identification rather than in their assessment of individual candidates. Both perspectives suggest that the role of competing candidate traits—other than party identification—in voter decision-making is derived from the preferences of the voters themselves; in effect, the electorate gets the legislators that they deserve based on their own preferred criteria for office-holders.

This view has been influential in analyses of electoral behavior within the three self-governing Pacific dependencies of the United States: American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and especially Guam. Guam, the largest of the three in population, became a partially self-governing unincorporated U.S. territory in 1950; for the fifty-one years prior to that, it was a U.S. naval station with a stateless indigenous population. The U.S. Public Law (48 U.S.C. §1421 et seq., known on Guam as The Organic Act) that established the island’s government requires maintenance of a single elected legislative chamber known as the Guam Senate, numbering no more than 21 members. A relatively small number of well-known wealthy and politically-influential families have held a majority of the legislative seats during the past 40 years.[[3]](#footnote-3) Commentators on Guam’s elections have generally assumed that this pattern is due to *pari pari*, Guam’s version of a traditional relationship in Micronesian culture in which a high status individual or family exchanges favors with a lower status individual or family for mutual benefit and alliance. In effect, voters are alleged to support members of the most prominent indigenous families for legislative office because their culture identifies such personal traits as the most acceptable basis for choosing candidates, with the expectation that their support will result in benefits for the voters’ own family.

The authors of this paper acknowledge that traditional culture probably has had an impact on Guam’s politics, particularly in the mid-20th century when the island’s culture was significantly more traditional than today. However, after more than 65 years of U.S. civics education in the public schools and colleges of Guam and nearly 50 years of unlimited travel between Guam and the mainland, we hypothesize that this cultural legacy alone is insufficient to explain the maintained dominance of personal traits—notably membership in a small number of well-known families—in the selection of Guam’s legislature. Instead, we propose that elements of the structure of the legislative institution contribute to both the continued dominance of the legislature by a few Chamorru and Chamorru-Filipino families…and to widespread popular dissatisfaction with the Guam Senate and its members.

Background: The Development of the Guam Senate

The Guam Senate originated in the 1930s, with the decision of a Commander of Naval Station Guam to establish an elected consultative panel to advise him on concerns of the civilian community living on the island. At that time, most indigenous (Chamorru) residents had neither attended secondary school nor achieved fluency in English. The consultative council therefore was not broadly representative of the population but rather was composed of what has been described as “middlemen”—individuals who bridge the externally-imposed colonial or "national" political system and indigenous political and cultural realities. As described by Rodman and Counts,

Political middlemen are individuals who attempt to act as intermediaries between an encapsulating government and a local population. Some middlemen are mere messengers, go-betweens without initiative or responsibility. Other middlemen …play roles that influence the pace and direction of change in the societies in which they exist[[4]](#footnote-4)

Indigenous members of the advisory council were chosen in large part because of their English-language ability, education at least through high school completion, and their success in navigating the intricacies of American culture as businessmen or professionals.

The Organic Act of 1950 granted U.S. citizenship to the indigenous people of Guam, established a civilian governor, and empowered the Guam Senate to make decisions regarding local government, with some notable exceptions. The two largest sources of GovGuam revenue—income taxes and program-related grants from the Federal government—are outside the purview of the legislature.[[5]](#footnote-5) The Federal grants increasingly are tied to very specific definitions of service delivery and operational procedure; the income tax structure is that enacted by the U.S. Congress, although proceeds from the tax are used primarily to pay for personnel costs not covered by grants and to address unfunded congressional mandates. As a result, the Guam Senate has limited ability to influence the revenue of the territorial government as well as restrictions on spending decisions and government operations. This could be changed with enactment of higher real estate taxes or business taxes—currently responsible for less than 10% of total government revenue—but the Guam Senate has not considered these.

In recent decades, the Guam Senate has numbered 15 members, elected every two years on an at-large basis. Initially, all Senators belonged to a single political party; they split in 1956 into the Popular Party and the Territorial Party over the refusal of then-speaker Antonio Won Pat to honor an agreement to rotate the speakership among other Senators. The Popular Party transformed into the Democratic Party of Guam in 1960 while the Territorial Party morphed into the Republican Party of Guam in 1966.[[6]](#footnote-6) Guam electoral law effectively requires all legislative candidates to run in either the Republican or Democratic primaries; an independent candidacy is theoretically possible but requires an enormous level of political organization to obtain the thousands of necessary petition signatures. The top 15 vote-getters in each primary then proceed to the general election, in each voter is permitted to vote for up to 15 candidates. Few Senate candidates receive support from most voters; only six of the 15 victors in the 2014 elections, for example, received support from a majority of all voters.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Guam law since the 1980s prohibits employees of the Territorial Government from either holding party office or running as candidates for elective office. This eliminates the possible candidacies of public school teachers and administrators, university and junior college faculty, utility employees, hospital employees, port and airport employees, and most individuals who in other locations would be employed by municipalities rather than the equivalent of the state government.

Electoral History of the Guam Senate

Early two-party elections for the Guam Senate resulted in several “sweeps” in which only one party or the other received all or nearly all of the legislative seats. In these elections, the contests were clearly between two sets of family alliances. Since the 1980s, however, the adhesion of specific notable families to the “Democratic” or “Republican” parties has weakened. For example, Carl Gutierrez, a major figure in Guam’s Democratic Party, responded to a feud with another Democratic family in the 1980s by attempting an independent campaign for governor with a Republican running-mate. More recently, first cousins Vince Ada and Tom Ada have been elected respectively as Republican and Democratic Senators (with fewer than 1,500 vote differences between them in the last two elections). Thus, although members of the same families have dominated the legislature for nearly 50 years, the Guam Senate now consists of a relatively stable Democratic majority and a Republican minority.

**GUAM LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS RESULTS BY PARTY, 2008-2014**

During the past four legislative elections, both Republican and Democratic candidates associated with long-established indigenous political families—Chamorru and Filipino-Chamorru—have won between eight and ten of the largest vote totals. Other candidates, including those of mainland Asian or mainland U.S. origin, generally compete to achieve the 11th through 15th highest vote totals and thereby win seats in the legislatures.

Policy-Related Traits versus Personal/Family Traits in Campaigning

The evidence of electoral success during the past thirty years strongly suggests that traits related to family status, ethnic culture, and local celebrity continue to dominate Guam’s Senate elections. This evidence was supported by interviews conducted in 2015 among seven unsuccessful candidates for election or reelection in the 2012 and 2014 legislative contests. All six—three Republicans and three Democrats—reported that they received little or no direct support from their respective parties after winning nomination, other than being listed on sample ballots. They were expected to continue all fund-raising and campaign staffing as individual candidates rather than as members of an organized political party. All six further acknowledged that they realized they were running for one of the 15 cherished legislative seats against all 29 other possible general election candidates, both Republican and Democrat.

“Of course I ran as an individual. I had to win more votes than other candidates, including those running in my party. It made no difference if number 15 was a Republican or a Democrat if I’m number 16 or 17.”

“I didn’t run against other candidates, but I always told people to vote for me. I didn’t tell people to vote for all the Republicans.”

Five of the six losing nominees reported that their campaigns deliberately stressed policy innovations rather than personal traits or family ties. One candidate had chosen to focus on improved family support systems, an issue which she believes enabled her to win election to the Senate in 2012. A second failed candidate for reelection believes that support for stronger vocational education had won him office in 2012 but failed to garner him reelection in 2014. In both cases, the candidates acknowledged that existing budget commitments limited their ability to pursue the promised reforms. A third candidate who failed to win election emphasized strict adherence to conservative Catholic values. The remaining two “policy”-focused nominees—who received the lowest vote totals in the general election—advocated changes that probably were considered radical by large numbers of the electorate: respectively, extensive privatization of utilities and other services now provided by the Territorial Government, and legalization of marijuana for recreational use, in part to encourage drug-related tourism.

Some of the unsuccessful candidates found election campaigning to be both enjoyable and informative. Two of them cited the delicious traditional island cuisine served at candidate events and all of the interviews expressed varying amounts of pleasure in meeting so many voters. However, some of the interviews also expressed frustration that the parties did not compete on the basis of clear-cut policy choices or priorities, and that the most successful candidates stressed histories of public service or of assisting the people of Guam rather than future plans.

In summary, interviews with the unsuccessful candidates provide anecdotal evidence in support of the belief that policy-related concerns have been less successful in gaining voter support in Guam legislative elections than other candidate traits. However, the interviews also suggest that policy concerns can be influential in voter decisions. Two candidates perceive that they won office due to their policy positions and failed at reelection in part because their political parties failed to support their proposed reforms or because funds to enact their proposals were unavailable. In contrast, two nominees who campaigned on policy preferences that appear to be far from the mainstream were rewarded with very low voter support.

What Voters Want: Results of Voter Surveys Using Semantic Differential

The question of whether voters themselves placed a strong priority on personal traits versus policy-related traits in selecting candidates was addressed through a survey using sematic differential techniques to create a summative index measure to characterize the voter preferences. Semantic differential has been used since the 1950s in studies that sought to define voter perceptions of electoral candidacies.[[8]](#footnote-8) The process of development began with focus groups to collect descriptions that differentiate between voter characterization of candidate traits that are related to policy competence (e.g., “describes a new approach to reduce an island-wide problem,” “agrees with my own views on spending priorities,” ”can be trusted to serve the people’s interest rather than special private interests”) as well as personal traits that are less related to policy (“personally generous,” ”warm and friendly,” ”comes from a well-known family.”). These descriptors were then paired in survey questionnaires as opposing ends of a continuum, allowing voters to choose between policy-relevant traits and personal traits:

My ideal candidate for Guam Senate should be:

 1 2 3 4 5 6

Be warm and Offer a clever solution

 friendly to an island-wide problem

In trial applications of the survey, the use of correlation analysis screened out those descriptions which did not clearly link to a common, widespread conceptualization of policy-related traits versus other personal traits. This left a set of dichotomous responses that measure the extent to which survey respondents favor policy-related traits in describing their “ideal” legislative candidate versus favoring other personal traits. The endpoints of the spectrum varied at random to prevent response set results.

Surveys were conducted in the spring 2015 at a variety of locations on the 140 square miles of Guam that lie outside the island’s two large military bases, including the three main shopping areas, village stores and parish church parking lots, and college campuses. Respondents were required to have voted in the 2014 legislative elections. A total of 193 surveys were completed; demographic data indicated close parallel to the voting population in ethnicity but oversampling of the under 30 year-old voting cohort. This oversampling was intentional, to assess the possibility that younger indigenous voters whose values are less closely aligned with traditional island culture might produce different results from older indigenous voters.

Each survey was scored between a possible 6 points—“perfect” preference for non-policy traits—and a possible 36 points, indicating “perfect” preference for policy-relevant traits.

The survey results found that 80% of all surveys scored between 21 and 29: indicating that most voters desired a mix of policy-relevant and non-policy relevant personal traits in their ideal candidate, with a moderate preference for policy-relevant traits. The lowest score obtained was 7 and the highest score obtained was a single respondent who achieved a 36. There were no statistically significant differences among the voters associated with age category or ethnicity (Chamorru, Filipino, other Asian, non-Asian). The survey also indicated that the length of time that survey respondents had spent living in the United States made no difference in their preferences for candidate traits.

These preliminary survey results suggest that neither Guam voters in general nor Guam voters of purely indigenous ethnic Chamorru descent are strongly supportive of candidates who lack policy-relevant traits. Instead, Guam voters appear to favor a mix of traits that combine both the Jeffersonian ideal of candidates judged by their virtue and wisdom and the Adams depiction of candidates judged by what we now would describe as celebrity status and personality traits. These preferences do not appear to be affected by voter age; however, we recognize that we did not ask survey respondents the more sensitive issue of educational attainment and that this may be a possible influence on voter priorities for an ideal candidate. We also recognize that the use of an “ideal” candidate rather than assessment of specific actual legislative candidates may have had an impact on the validity of the voter responses to the survey.

Conclusions

Understanding of the motivations and preferences of voters in the Pacific islands to date has been based on anecdotal evidence and on cultural anthropology rather than systematic behaviorist inquiry. Surveys on Guam, for example, previously have been simple Likert scale measures of the relative importance of specific issues or the likelihood of voting for specific nominees.

This preliminary study suggests that previous views of the voting behavior of Chamorru and other voters on Guam may be at least partially incorrect. Guam voters appear to want to choose among prospective legislators on the basis of policy-relevant traits in addition to personal traits. With each legislative candidate effectively running against 29 other candidates of both parties, common policy themes shared among candidates are unlikely to lead to electoral success while personal traits that cause the candidate to stand out become more important in a successful campaign. Additionally, the limitations on the ability of winning candidates to pursue policy-relevant reform and the avoidance of clear policy choices provided by the two political parties makes it difficult for voters to have their own policy preferences reflected in the democratic process.

It is possible that voters tend to fall back on personal traits as the primary criteria for selecting a candidate because voting on the basis of policy-relevant traits is not a viable alternative. This in turn might explain the high level of cynicism about the Guam Senate expressed by educated voters, such as one student’s comment that “We don’t want more autonomy on Guam because that would give more power to the people already in office.” We believe that additional research, based on data collection conducted on the eve of the next legislative election, may clarify this possibility.

1. Letter of 28 October 1813, from Jefferson to Adams, as published in Chapter 15, Document 61in Philip P. Kurland and Ralph Lerner (eds.), *The Founders’ Constitution*, University of Chicago Press, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Letter of 15 November 1813, from Adams to Jefferson, *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Prominent among these are the Calvos, a family that includes the current governor, two previous governors, and the families of two sitting members of the Guam Senate (one by marriage). Other families with at least one sitting member of the Guam in addition to previous legislators, governors, and gubernatorial candidates are the Ada family, the Aguon family, the Blas family, the Bordallo family, the Camacho family, the Espaldon family, the Quitugua family, and the Underwood family. Of the 15 current members of the Guam Senate, 11 are close relatives of previous legislators, governors, congressional delegates, and gubernatorial nominees. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. William L. Rodman and Dorothy Ayers Counts (1983) *Middlemen and Brokers in Oceania, ASAO Monograph No. 9*. University Press, Inc., p, vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The most recent independent audit of GovGuam finances found that these two sources represented 59.7% of total

 government revenue for FY2012. An additional 6% of the revenue is derived from service fees. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For details on Guam’s postwar political history until the 1990s, the most cited-source is Robert F. Rogers (1995), *Destiny’s Landfall*, University of Hawaii Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Guam Board of Elections reported 37,323 voters in the 2014 elections and that only six of the 15 successful candidates received more than 18,656 votes. The difference between the vote total received in reelection by Senator Brant McCreadie (15,577) and the 16th-ranked and therefore unsuccessful reelection candidacy of Senator Aline Yamashita (15,244) was only 0.62% of the total vote. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note Charles E. Osgood (1952) The nature and measurement of meaning, in *Psychological Bulletin* 49(3):197-237, Lynn R. Anderson and Alan R. Bass (1967) Some effects of victory or defeat upon perceptions of political candidates, in *Journal of Social Psychology* 73:227-240. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)