

Measuring Attendance Patterns at Pacific Island Forum Leaders Meetings

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In Brief 2018/20

Much of the domestic commentary surrounding the 2018 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting (the Forum) in Nauru centred on the new Australian prime minister's decision not to attend in person. This is by no means unusual, either for Australia or indeed for other forum members. Since the Forum's foundation, member countries have often been represented by deputy prime ministers, foreign ministers, other ministers or special envoys when leaders have been unable, or unwilling, to attend.

This In Brief looks at patterns of attendance by heads of government at Forum meetings since the organisation's establishment in 1971. It considers only full members of the Forum (not associate members). Data is drawn largely from communiqués issued at the conclusion of the Forum's regular meetings. There are gaps in the data: of the 49 communiqués issued since 1971, six do not specify the level at which members were represented (1974, 1975, 1979, and 1995–97). Even so, 43 communiqués represents a robust sample. Some of the gaps can be filled in: for Australian attendance for instance through online archival resources, and it has been assumed for the purpose of this analysis that countries that hosted forum meetings in the six years mentioned above were represented at head of government level.

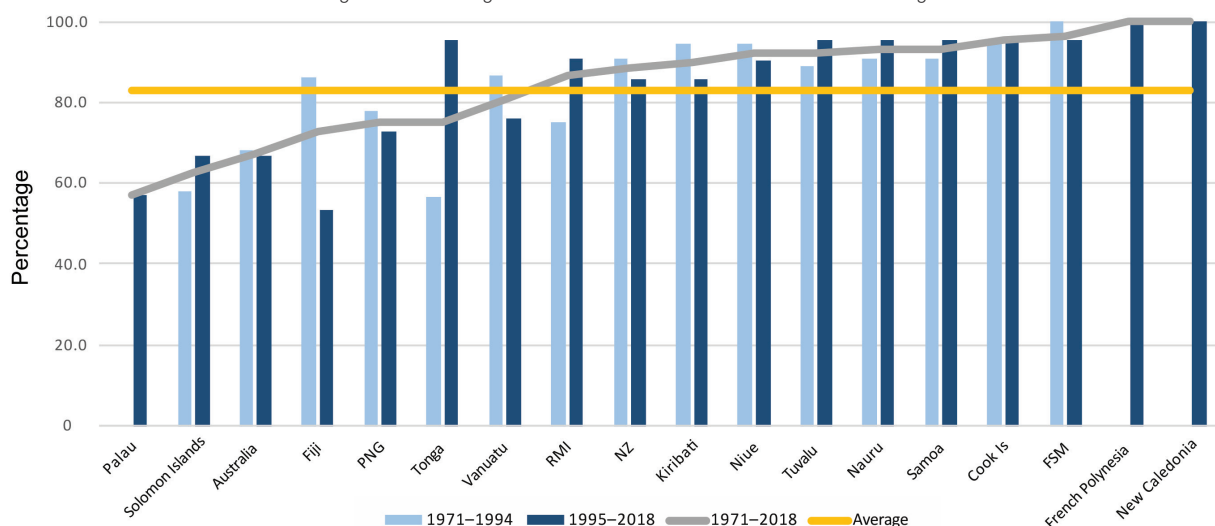
A first observation to make is that it is a rare Forum meeting

at which all members are represented at head of government level. On the evidence of the 43 communiqués used in this analysis that has only happened on six occasions, most recently in 2006. The average level of attendance by heads of government since 1971 is 82.8 per cent. The figure for this year's Forum was 77.7 per cent (14 out of 18 leaders). Other non-attending heads of government in 2018 were from Papua New Guinea, Palau and Fiji. Fiji's Prime Minister Bainimarama has boycotted Forum meetings since Fiji's suspension from the Forum was lifted in 2014, with Fiji being represented at ministerial level since then.

Figure 1 shows percentage attendance at head of government level from 1971 to 1994 (light bars), from 1995 to 2018 (dark bars) and for the whole period since 1971 (inclined horizontal line). Palau joined in 1995 so the graph does not show data for the earlier period; French Polynesia and New Caledonia have only been full members since 2017 and therefore have only a short – albeit impeccable – record of attendance so far.

What does Figure 1 reveal? In general, the smaller east/central Pacific and north Pacific members of the Forum have a consistently better record of attendance at head of government level than the larger south-west Pacific states and Australia. Niue, Tuvalu, Samoa, Cook Islands and the Federated States

Figure 1 – Percentage Attendance at Pacific Island Leaders Forum Meetings



of Micronesia all have a better than 90 per cent record, with Marshall Islands and New Zealand not far behind. Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (just) all come in below the mean. (Fiji is considered separately below.)

Australia (at 67.4 per cent) has a consistently lower level of attendance at head of government level than New Zealand (88.4 per cent). Overall, Australia has the third lowest record, after Palau and Solomon Islands.

Attendance levels for most countries have been more or less the same in the earlier and later periods. Only two countries show a markedly different pattern: Tonga and Fiji. Both are foundation members of the Forum, and Fiji hosts the Forum Secretariat. Following a very patchy performance in the earlier period, over the past 24 years Tonga has become one of the most consistent attendees at head of government level. Fiji has gone in the opposite direction, due largely to Prime Minister Bainimarama's boycott. (Fiji's suspension from the Forum from 2009 to 2014 is not counted for the purpose of this analysis.)

Another way of measuring member countries' engagement in the Forum is to compare the extent to which the task of hosting the annual meeting has been shared since 1971. Figure 2 displays a measure (left hand axis) derived by dividing the number of times each Forum member (except French Polynesia and New Caledonia) has been eligible to host the annual meeting by the number of times they have hosted it (right hand axis). The analysis has been brought forward to 2020 since we already know the hosts in 2019 (Tuvalu) and 2020 (Vanuatu). The lower the measure, the greater the frequency of hosting the Forum.

Figure 2 shows that the responsibility of hosting the Forum has been shared fairly evenly among the membership, although Tuvalu, Solomon Islands and Niue (and to a lesser extent Kiribati, Marshall Islands and Tonga) have, on average, hosted less frequently than the majority of member countries. By 2020, all

members (except New Caledonia and French Polynesia) will have hosted the Forum at least twice, while none will have hosted more than four times. Australia hosted the Forum in 1972, 1983, 1994 and 2009, making it one of eight members who will have hosted on four occasions by 2020.

Conclusion

A tentative conclusion from this analysis might be that the Forum has been a higher foreign policy priority for the smaller east/central and north Pacific states (and for New Zealand) than for the larger south-west Pacific states and Australia (and for Palau, an outlier on this analysis). Explaining why that might be the case is a matter for further study, even if it seems plausible to expect that smaller states might instinctively invest more in regional organisations than larger states. Of course, tallies of Forum attendance at head of government level can only ever be a crude and imperfect measure of any country's commitment to the Pacific Islands Forum, or to Pacific regionalism in general. They do not, for instance, correlate neatly with the patterns of Forum hosting discussed above. In Australia's case, its relations with the Pacific are multifaceted and extend far beyond its engagement with the Forum, important as that organisation is. Still, it remains to be seen whether the growth of China's influence in the Pacific will prompt more frequent and consistent participation by Australian prime ministers in Pacific Island Forum Leaders meetings in future.

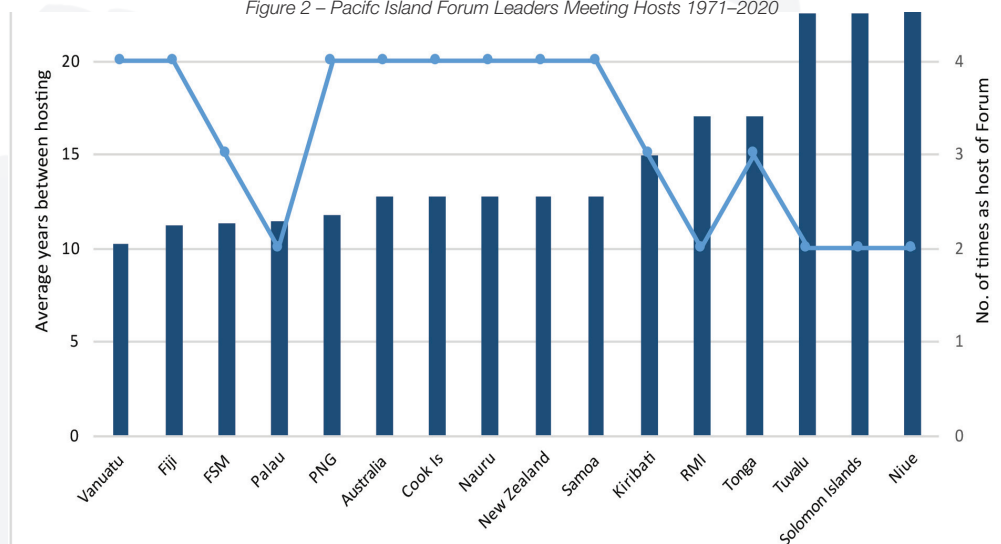
Author notes

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References

Source for all data: Pacific Islands Secretariat www.forumsec.org. Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2018. [PM Transcripts](#)

Figure 2 – Pacific Island Forum Leaders Meeting Hosts 1971–2020



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We acknowledge the Australian Government's support for the production of the *In Brief* series.

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