

Democracy in the South Pacific:
The Intersection of Pre- and Post-Colonial Governance

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Introduction

Traditional Versus Western Institutions: The Case of Tuvalu

Tuvalu, a small island nation located in the Pacific, has a parliament comprised of 8 different constituencies, with the name *Tuvalu* even meaning “eight standing together.” These constituencies each return two members of parliament to Tuvalu’s 16-member *Fale i Fono*, or national parliament. Tuvalu, currently, possesses no political parties, although they are not outright banned, and each member runs as an independent. Furthermore, Tuvalu uses a plurality bloc electoral system, and although it is a non-partisan democracy, follows western Westminster-based governing traditions, with the independent members of parliament organizing themselves into government and opposition factions. After gaining its independence in 1978 and holding its first general election as an independent state in 1981, Tuvalu has been a relatively stable democracy, with some glaring issues, however.

In addition to the Westminster-style parliament, the Tuvaluan system includes another key institution known as the *Falekaupule*. Each of the eight inhabited islands and atolls in Tuvalu possesses a *Falekaupule*, which is the traditional assembly of elders for each island. The *Falekaupule* is headed by the *Kaupule*, which is the executive branch of each *Falekaupule*, and is an elected position. The *Falekaupule* have several roles, but are responsible for managing the public health, public safety, education, agriculture, communication, and town planning of each island (*Falekaupule Act*, s.36), giving these regional bodies considerable autonomy. The *Falekaupule Act*, originally devised in 1997, is the document responsible for describing the role of the *Falekaupule*, as well as the relationship between the *Falekaupule* and the national parliament.

This role, which as the *Falekaupule Act* describes is to provide “policy and project development in accordance with its plans and programs” to the island’s two members of parliament (*Falekaupule Act*, s.40(c)), was central to a major constitutional crisis in 2010.

After the election of Lotoala Metia to one of Nukufetau’s, a Tuvaluan island with a population of roughly 581, two seats, the *Falekaupule* of Nukufetau advised him to support the bid of Enele Sopoaga, Nukufetau’s other member of parliament who had been attempting to become prime minister. Proceeding a national election, the elected members of parliament are given a two-week period in which they are supposed to elect a prime minister amongst themselves and declare whether they are to support the government or be a member of the opposition. Within this period, during an island-wide celebration of the election of Sopoaga and Metia on Nukufetau, a message was delivered to Metia that read “The Chiefs and Elders of Nukufetau kindly request Lotoala Metia to fully support Enele Sopoaga, who is thinking of registering his nomination for position of prime minister for the next 4 years. It is a wish and intention of Nukufetau for both of you to work together in the next 4 years. Working together is good for Nukufetau in the future!” (High Court of Tuvalu 2012, 3). Seeing as this request would have required Metia to abandon the parliamentary group he had already intended on siding with, Metia chose to ignore the *Falekaupule*’s request, and the two members of parliament from Nukufetau ended up on opposing sides of parliament.

The government that ended up being formed at the end of this two-week period, headed by Maatia Toafa, was ultimately defeated by a motion of no confidence that had been triggered by Metia (High Court of Tuvalu 2012, 5). Seeing another opportunity for the two members of parliament from Nukufetau to form government together, the *Falekaupule* of Nukufetau sent Metia yet another message, this time reading:

The Nukufetau Elders would like to ask you Hon Lotoala Metia to strive to achieve the aspiration of the Nukufetau elders and that is for the Head of Government this time to be held by one of you MPs of Nukufetau. In the light of this aspiration, the elders would like to ask that you Hon Lotoala Metia to join group with Hon Enele S Sopoaga to consider how best this aspiration can be achieved. We also ask you Hon Enele S Sopoaga to nominate and support the name of Hon Lotoala Metia to the position of prime minister of the new government. That is the proposal from the Nukufetau elders, and we all pray that your efforts are blessed for a satisfactory outcome (High Court of Tuvalu 2012, 5).

After not receiving any sign that Metia had intended on working with Sopoaga, however, the Falekaupule ended up sending a delegation of five of their elders to the national capital in Funafuti, where they demanded a meeting with Metia, warning that the “Falekaupule will impose another strong and harsh decision upon you” (High Court of Tuvalu 2012, 7.) This “strong and harsh decision” was the traditional Tuvaluan practice of *falaesea*, a practice in which the Falekaupule would banish people from their respective islands, typically to the island of Nanumanga. The Falekaupule argued that since they had ordered *falaesea* upon Metia, he was essentially “banished” from Nukufetau and subsequently would be unable to represent the island as its member of parliament (High Court of Tuvalu 2012, 42).

While the Chief Justice overseeing this case had dismissed this argument and ruled in favour of the defense, this case is an important cornerstone not only in the political history of Tuvalu, but also in the general politics of the wider region of the South Pacific, and the application of indigenous governing principles in politics all around the world. This case, *Nukufetau v Metia*, represents the balance of power that many states have between their

traditional indigenous governing structures, and their, often post-colonial, western style democratic institutions. That question is the central focus of this thesis, which considers the relationship between traditional and Western institutions.

Research Question

Nukufetau v. Metia reveals a particular tension within the Tuvaluan case that raises questions about the level of synergy that traditional methods of governance and western political institutions have with one another. Additionally, this tension is certainly not unique to Tuvalu and can be seen across the South Pacific and beyond. *Nukufetau v. Metia* shines light on two particularly important questions: those being how do political institutions affect the quality of democracy, and to what effect does the indigenization of political institutions influence quality of democracy in the South Pacific?

Although some scholars of the South Pacific have raised concerns about the relationship between pre- and post-colonial indigenous institutions, the subject has not been systematically studied. To solve this issue, this study has created an original index referred to as the *Incorporation of Indigenous Governance Index* (IIGI) that will provide a way to quantifiably compare and contrast differing levels of indigenization of institutions across the world. The value of this index is that it provides a way to systematically evaluate the relationship between the indigenization of political institutions and quality of democracy in the South Pacific and beyond. In developing this quantitative tool, this study, as well as the IIGI, hopes to not only answer a very timely and relevant question on the indigenization of political institutions, but also to attempt to decolonize some of the existing literature, and reveal problematic colonial assumptions that pre-existing datasets, as well as academics, make about the region.

Hypothesis

The indigenization of political institutions across the South Pacific is perhaps best captured by the “Pacific Way” movement, a term coined by Fijian president Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara in 1970 (quoted in Lawson 2010, 2). The “Pacific Way” movement, which Lawson compares to the *Négritude* movement of French West-Africa (Lawson 1996, 12) was a movement to further indigenize political institutions from a “Pacific” perspective, instead of letting institutions run through a predominantly western lens. Mara saw the Pacific Way as a way to move countries within Oceania away from Westminster-style governance, and more towards consensus-based politics rooted in consociationalism (Chappell 1998, 249).

In response to the movement, one of the most foundational works on the subject is Dr. Stephanie Lawson’s *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific*. In this text, Lawson argues that movements, such as the “Pacific Way”, to indigenize political institutions are a power grab by an indigenous aristocratic elite, and that traditional systems of chiefly governance are incompatible with western systems of democracy (Lawson 1996, 12). While *Nukufetau v. Metia* proved that pre- and post-colonial systems of governance can indeed clash, increasing self-determination and incorporating more co-operative systems between indigenous groups and national legislatures, in theory, should not lead to a hindering of democracy. Hence, Lawson’s controversial argument has sparked considerable debate within the field.

This study hypothesizes that Lawson is incorrect, that the two systems are not inherently incompatible with one another, and that indigenizing political institutions would in no way erode democracy.

Summary

This study begins with a review of the literature on political institutions within the South Pacific, focusing on the aforementioned knowledge gap, as well as key issues such as a lack of systematic coverage, conceptual slippage, and an overall lack of methodological rigour within the field. After identifying these gaps, chapter one then directly analyzes Lawson's work and the debate that it sparked and elaborates on how the establishment of the IIGI can not only significantly contribute to the debate over Lawson's work, but also how it can help to ameliorate the flaws within the existing literature.

Chapter two outlines the IIGI and various components relating to the indigenization of political institutions. It explains the rationale behind the overall formula of how those observations are then converted into a scale from 0 to 1. After establishing the IIGI (the independent variable), this study then introduces Freedom House score as a measure of the overall quality of democracy (the dependent variable). Finally, this chapter concludes by describing how an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression can be used to empirically test the relationship between the two variables.

After establishing the dataset and methodology, chapter three analyzes the results of the OLS Regression and subsequent Pearson's R analysis. Contrary to this study's initial hypothesis, the results appear to support Lawson's assertion.

Chapter four reflects on the surprising results of the statistical analysis. In particular, it scrutinizes the nature of the Freedom House dataset, revealing troubling flaws in both the methodology and theoretical outlook. This, in turn, casts doubt on the reliability of the OLS Regression in chapter three. More importantly, however, it raises larger questions about subtle

yet persistent neo-colonial bias in the way political scientists theorize and measure critical but contested concepts like “quality of democracy.”

Literature Review

After establishing that there is a clear and evident clash between pre-colonial systems of governance and post-colonial, typically western/Westminster, systems of governance this chapter will now analyze what the existing academic literature has to say about this debate. However, the existing literature is certainly not without its problems. This chapter will analyze and critique the existing literature, with specific focus towards its scope, lack of concrete definitions, and lack of methodological rigour. After demonstrating that these are evident problems, this chapter will then analyze *Tradition versus Democracy in the South Pacific* by Dr. Stephanie Lawson, one of the most influential works on this topic, and analyze how this work falls victim to the same shortcomings as the rest of the literature. After analyzing the problems within the literature, and the existing knowledge gap, this project will then propose the creation of a new dataset to quantify levels of indigenization of governance across the world in order to ameliorate the existing issues, but also to challenge Lawson's assertion that traditional pre-colonial systems of governance are inherently incompatible with western systems of democracy within the South Pacific.

The South Pacific in Comparative Perspective

Compared to other world regions such as Latin America and Europe, the comparative literature on political institutions in the South Pacific remains markedly underdeveloped, suffering from chronic problems of superficiality and a lack of methodological rigour. Take, for example, one of the most robust sources on the South Pacific as a whole: *Pacific Ways: Government and Politics in the Pacific Islands*, edited by Stephen Levine. This collection of essays is more reminiscent of a textbook than an edited volume, however, with each chapter outlining the government frameworks of every independent state in the South Pacific, including some overseas

dependencies, with specific focus on certain political mechanisms unique to each state. For instance, the chapter on Tuvalu primarily focuses on Tuvalu's non-partisan nature, the role of the prime minister, and the role of the Falekaupule in relation to its national government (Corbett & Fraenkel 2016, 350). While it is certainly a well-rounded overview on Tuvalu's institutions, it is far from an in-depth analysis and only serves to introduce the reader to different polities within the Pacific as a whole.

Furthermore, the overwhelming amount of literature that exists relating to Tuvalu primarily focuses on the state's relationship with climate change and rising sea levels; or takes a more international relations-focused approach by highlighting the state's unique relationship towards Taiwan and China. The extant literature on Tuvalu's domestic politics, particularly from a comparative perspective, or on its institutional frameworks and methods of governance, are relatively few and far between compared to where the general academic focus on Tuvalu lays. Due to this, Tuvalu, and many other states in the South Pacific, are largely left out of large reputable datasets, such as the Varieties of Democracy project, which, despite its comprehensive focus that includes data from as far back as the early 18th century, does not include most states in the South Pacific. It does, however, include data on several European polities that no longer exist. This omission leaves a sizeable gap in the research and study of existing democratic policies.

These are not facets unique to the literature surrounding Tuvalu and are reflective of many pitfalls that hinder the existing literature on the entire region. Similarly to Tuvalu, most of the political literature on the South Pacific is primarily concerned with climate change policies or, in rare cases, conducted with a more IR perspective focusing on China's relationship with states in the South Pacific. This creates a very large gap in knowledge on domestic politics across

all states within the South Pacific, with the possible exception of Fiji and the Solomon Islands – which have sizable amounts of literature concerning their histories of coups and civil conflicts. Sources that concern the indigenization of governance, however, are very few and far between, and subject to their own flaws.

Conceptual Slippage

While many scholars do analyze the intersection between the Falekaupule and the central government within Tuvalu, they are done in rather vague terms – or done using terminology that tend to homogenise “traditional modes of governance” across the South Pacific as a whole. Goldsmith, for instance, while writing primarily in critique of the existing literature’s tendency to describe South Pacific governance as vague, does not offer a concrete solution – nor an alternative framework on how to better describe its functionality. Goldsmith writes “the issues at stake have been argued back and forth in the voluminous literature on ‘the politics of tradition’ and are too complex to admit of an easy summary at this point. Let me simply say that, although tradition has been used to justify non-democratic practices and the suppression of critical thought it has also been a necessary resource in the quest for Pacific independence” (Goldsmith 2005, 109).

Goldsmith compares the Falekaupule Act in Tuvalu to the Village Fono Act in Samoa, and treats those two pieces of legislation as if they are on a spectrum of “more traditional” to “less traditional,” writing that “In Samoa, the Village Fono Act has presented some genuine challenges to the power of the state, but in Tuvalu, the effects of the Falekaupule Act are not yet as dramatic and are less likely to present such difficulties for national government” (Goldsmith 2005, 108). Considering that Tuvalu is about 1100km away from Samoa, the underlying relationship between the Village Fono and the Samoan parliament, as well as the Falekaupule

and the Tuvaluan parliament should be considered independently of one another, opposed to homogenizing them within these structures.

This vagueness is a severe problem within the overarching literature. Oppong writes that Small Island States, “particularly those in the Pacific, have also sought to incorporate traditional systems of governance into formal administrative and governance systems. However, these informal institutions have failed to secure the requisite buy-in from various external donor agencies” (Oppong 2016, 28). While Oppong does, somewhat, try to elaborate on what traditional “informal institutions” look like in Tuvalu, which he defines as the “Tuvaluan Way.” Oppong writes describes the “Tuvaluan Way” as being a set of “‘home-grown’ beliefs in chieftaincy, custom, and duty to support one’s family and kin” (Oppong 2016, 30), and that “the trajectory of institutional growth is best typified by a continual quest to integrate Western norms with so-called Tuvaluan ways” (Oppong 2016, 31). These are, evidently, quite vague definitions of indigenous beliefs, and are not adequately supplemented by any sort of institutional view of the inner workings of the Falekaupule, nor an interpretive anthropological analysis of the relation of the average Tuvaluan voter with their local Falekaupule.

Richardson writes that “Tuvalu is a rarity in the Pacific, with its traditional and modern governance institutions formally harmonised through the Falekaupule Act. Its success in enabling stronger island autonomy has attracted interest from other countries and experts in the field” (Richardson 2009, 124). While this may be true, Richardson does not particularly outline what makes the Falekaupule a “traditional” method of governance, and while he highlights the aforementioned tensions present in the *Nukufetau v. Metia* case, that being those tensions between modern western institutions and “traditional norms and practices” (Richardson 2009,

124), he does not attempt to get to the root cause of this power struggle, nor analyze to what extent it actually affects the contemporary state of Tuvaluan politics.

This issue of vagueness sweeps well beyond the Tuvaluan case, and it can be seen across the literature of the wider south Pacific. On explaining the Fijian case, Naidu writes that “The nature of participatory and representative politics, periodic elections and the possibility of electoral defeat, public scrutiny in the use of taxpayers money, equality of voters and vying candidates, the ravages election campaigns, bureaucratic rules and procedures, checks and balances do not complement traditional forms of authority” (Naidu 2000, 64). Once again, it is unclear what these traditional forms of governance that Naidu is referring to actually are. Additionally, Naidu’s assertion is fundamentally untested, and is only corroborated by his assertion that the Tongan monarchy and nobility are “strongly opposed to the pro-democracy movement because even the minimal demands for change in the political structures and processes are seen as the thin edge of the wedge that would totally undermine the traditional hierarchy of status and privileges.” (Naidu 2000, 64). This claim should absolutely be challenged and not taken at face value.

Vaitohi writes that democratization in Tonga was in fact supported by many members of the Tongan monarchy, writing that King Tupou V had been in favour of democratic reform since at least 1999 (when he was Crown Prince of Tonga), and “more importantly, in 2008 Tupou V announced that he would agree to relinquish his executive power and he called for a constitutional and political reform to be effective in 2010. In other words, he felt that the time was ripe to open the door for political reform” (Vaitohi 2025, 103). While public support and protests, such as the 2006 Nuku’alofa riots, were certainly instrumental in ushering in the 2010

constitutional reform, it would be erroneous to suggest that no part of the monarchy or nobility wanted to democratize the country and push towards more democratic institutions.

Overall, although there are many sources that discuss the role of “traditional governance” in the South Pacific, there is not one universal definition that all authors can agree on. This becomes inherently problematic as, as aforementioned, it makes attempts to compare systems in Samoa and Tuvalu, for example, extremely difficult to do without merely homogenizing all pre-colonial systems of governance under one umbrella. Where Oppong tries to define traditional governance in Tuvalu as “chieftaincy, custom, and duty to support one’s family and kin” (Oppong 2016, 30), another author, such as Nicola Manghi, could look at Tuvalu’s pre-colonial institutions and define them explicitly as the hierarchical and communal institutions that comprise the Falekaupule (Manghi 2024, 32). This shows that even within one state, there is no clear consensus on how to define traditional governance, which is almost certainly hindered by the lack of methodological rigour that is noted within the general academic literature surrounding the South Pacific. While Oppong’s definition is broader, and possibly more accurate to how the average Tuvaluan voter would describe their systems of governance, it is impossible to ascertain whether or not this is true without a robust and systematic anthropological study on how Tuvaluans perceive their relationship with the country’s government. Inversely, Manghi’s definition of traditional governance within Tuvalu is far narrower – choosing to specifically focus on the Falekaupule as a distinct institution. While this definition could be more helpful in specifying what indigenous governance means, it also misses a lot of the nuance on smaller-scale family-based politics that Oppong highlights.

Lack of Methodological Rigour

This pattern of sweeping generalizations and a lack of in-depth analysis is unfortunately typical of the existing scholarship on political institutions within the South Pacific. For instance, Corbett, in arguing that family relations are what dominates everyday politics in the South Pacific, writes “In contrast to a faceless rational-legal bureaucracy often idealized by modernists and donor agencies, the persistent influence of family and kin on politics in the Pacific is often referred to by the label ‘traditional’” (Corbett 2013, 56). However, it is important to note that Corbett notes that to reach this conclusion within Tuvalu, he had conducted this research by interviewing four Tuvaluan politicians and conducting zero life histories of any Tuvaluan politicians. Considering these interviews are, understandably, done anonymously this low sample size should absolutely be called into question. If we are to believe that family dominance is so prevalent across the Pacific as a whole, is it not, therefore, possible that the interviewed Tuvaluan politicians could stem from the same family or groups of families? Corbett does not give specific information on who the supposed influential families are in any of the states provided, nor does he explain if these ties are linked to more traditionally “powerful” families – such as those with hereditary chieftain ties, or if the more “powerful” families are due to some sort of new elite class of western-educated entrepreneurs and business owners. Indeed, the concept of “power” remains largely undefined. Furthermore, Corbett’s predominantly interpretivist methodology, which focuses almost exclusively on patterns and themes picked up amongst his interviews and life histories with the participating politicians, calls into question the possibility of cherry-picking, as well as the possibility of his observations and dataset not being large enough, particularly in states like Tuvalu or Niue, to be able to produce properly falsifiable findings.

Table 1. Corbett - Interviews and Life History by Country

Country	Interviews	Life Histories	Total
Cook Islands	4	2	6
Fiji	16	12	28
FSM	4	0	4
Kiribati	14	0	14
Marshall Islands	6	0	6
Nauru	6	0	6
Niue	2	1	3
Palau	7	1	8
Samoa	16	3	19
Solomon Islands	15	5	20
Tuvalu	4	0	4
Tonga	3	2	5
Vanuatu	5	2	7
Total	102	24	130

Table 1: Note. From “‘Everybody knows everybody’: Practising Politics in the Pacific Islands” by Jack Corbett, 2013, *Democratization*, 22(1), p. 52.

Corbett’s work is relatively unique in the context of the South Pacific, however, as he applies a qualitative statistical analysis to arrive at his conclusion. The overwhelming majority of literature on the South Pacific does not take a statistical approach, which is inherently problematic when trying to make assertions on the region as there is often not any effort made to systematically approach the region – which is likely fueled by the aforementioned lack of inclusion of these cases on most mainstream datasets, such as V-Dem. Without a clear and systematic approach to analyzing data gathered from these countries, any source that attempts to make broad assertions about general trends amongst the South Pacific has to be scrutinized and criticized as it would inherently be susceptible to cherry-picking.

Tradition vs. Democracy in the South Pacific

As aforementioned, a notable pitfall of the existing literature on the South Pacific is its over-reliance on a more hyper-specific case study approach. For instance, many sources will analyze cases like Fiji, Samoa, or Tonga and apply observations from those cases to the wider region of the South Pacific. This leads to a substantial lack of regional comparison, which acts a limitation on the literature – as it inherently leads to more case-study based texts as focusing more on area studies rather than on comparing phenomena and institutions across the region.

In her book *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific*, Stephanie Lawson argues that “the concept of tradition is one of the most important components of an ideological arsenal which has been used to counter the development of more democratic norms of political conduct and organization” (Lawson 1996, 5). Expanding more broadly on the Pacific, Lawson uses the examples of Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga, to argue that the push by the “Pacific Way,” a political movement in within Polynesia that seeks to restore or increase the power of indigenous political structures – similar to the *Négritude* movement of French West-Africa, is a “manipulation of tradition by indigenous elites in ways that enhance their own legitimacy by sanctifying the political order to which they owe their privilege” (Lawson 1996, 12). Lawson is certainly not alone in this assertion, as Alan Ward writes that “Custom has of course been manipulated to legitimise the aspirations of ruling groups. Many Pacific peoples themselves know this full well and are not generally blinded by their own symbolism and rhetoric. It becomes part of their politics, and the appropriate blend of custom and modernity is something they work at constantly” (Ward 1992, 90).

Lawson’s book is one of the most heavily cited works in the general political study of the South Pacific, however it certainly is not without its flaws. Lawson primarily analyzes three case

studies within the Pacific, those being Fiji, Samoa (which at the time was Western Samoa,) and Tonga. In each of the chapters, she argues that in each case, “tradition,” and therefor an attempt to preserve indigenous governance, is a power grab done by an indigenous elite class to maintain their authority or land claims. Lawson acknowledges the potential faults in her work revolving around only three case studies, stating that “the choice of three substantial case studies which focus on elite expressions of traditionalism rather than a broader (but more superficial) coverage of the South Pacific region and the entire range of issues concerned with tradition means that the critique is necessarily limited in a number of ways. A comparative analysis which included Melanesia, for example, would have yielded additional perspectives on traditionalist discourses as well as on the experiences and legacies of colonialism that have influenced their development” (Lawson 1996, ix). Confusingly, however, her analysis does include Melanesia, as Fiji is one of her primary case studies – which is predominantly a Melanesian state. Lawson herself even wrote that the “western and central regions of Fiji are often described as Melanesian with respect to both the physical characteristics of the people and their less stratified and smaller-scale sociopolitical structures” (Lawson 2013, 10). While Lawson does argue that Fijian culture is that of a mixture of Melanesian and Polynesian culture, her notion in 1996 that no Melanesian states were included is quite baffling considering the inclusion of Fiji, and could quite possibly be the result of the overall scholarship’s tendency to homogenize different regions within the South Pacific together.

Furthermore, Lawson holds a particularly authoritarian view of many societies within the South Pacific. She places heavy emphasis on a more institutionally based system of western-style governance without properly considering the participatory nature of many pre-colonial institutions across the South Pacific. In Tuvalu, for instance, many Tuvaluans will attend the

meetings of their local Falekaupule. The Commonwealth Local Government Forum even specifies that the primary “mechanism for the involvement and participation of citizens in local governance is the falekaupule assembly” (CLGF 2018, 2). Petersen writes that “Lawson’s position is, I think, the consequence of a perspective that overemphasizes the place of institutions in political life. In this approach, “democracy” is mostly about government. Yet, democracy is more appropriately— or at least more productively—understood as something considerably more extensive than a type of government” (Petersen 2000, 88). This is reflective of a greater debate within the field of political science. That being a more traditionally conservative view of democracy as a concrete and static set of checks and balances seen through a lens of western electoral institutions, compared to a more liberal sense of democracy as a vehicle to ensure equal rights, equitable representation, and maintenance of self-determination. On this debate, Petersen writes that “It is in the commitment to small-scale, face-to-face, and intensely participatory government that I find this democratic character most fully revealed” (Petersen 2000, 86).

Petersen also challenges Lawson’s view, anthropologically, of the inner workings of societies within the South Pacific. Lawson writes that the case studies in her work are so particularly protective of the “traditional” status quo, as they are home to the elites whose legitimacy rests upon rigid methods of hereditary succession (Lawson 1996, 12). However, Petersen writes that “Indeed, I have had chiefs explain to me that much of clanship’s viability lies precisely in the broad net of men it makes eligible for titles. A number of ethnographies describe situations in which it is obvious that ascription—local claims to the contrary notwithstanding—is not the most salient factor in access to titles. Lawson makes the error of granting credence to post facto claims, which in fact tend to legitimize rather than prescribe succession” (Petersen 2000, 87). Evidently, Petersen believes that Lawson’s idea of these South

Pacific societies as being rigidly hierarchical and authoritarian is based upon misguided information on how clanship and hereditary titles are actually passed down within Polynesian, Melanesian, and Micronesian cultures. Once again, this is reflective of the general literature's tendency to not only homogenize these regions but vaguely explain or refer to "traditional methods of governance" without properly analyzing their inner workings or anthropological origins.

Lawson's assertion that traditional methods of governance are incompatible with democracy is inherently problematic and should be held up to skepticism and empirical review before being accepted. It is clear from Petersen's argument that it is built upon outdated and inaccurate assumptions of how these hereditary functions interact with the general public but also the national government. Furthermore, Lawson heavily undervalues the role of small, local governance, which is particularly important across the Pacific. As aforementioned in the Tuvaluan example, the Falekaupule is one of the main instruments that a citizen can actually participate in their local governing process. However, under Lawson's assertion, the Falekaupule, as a traditional and hereditary based institution, is fundamentally flawed; even though it evidently provides great value to the democratic process within Tuvalu, particularly with its outlying islands.

While Lawson does use a traditional case-study based comparative analysis, her assertion is not only far too broad to possibly apply to all states within the South Pacific, but it also lacks any sort of quantifiable and falsifiable statistical analysis that a claim as powerful as this should require. If Lawson's assertion is correct, then, in theory, states that cater more towards their pre-colonial systems of governance and have more robust integration of these systems into the national legislature, would inherently be less democratic. However, purely by a reading of not

only Lawson's work, but from a reading of the general literature on this topic, it is almost impossible to tell whether or not that this is actually true.

Conversely, this study seeks to fundamentally test Lawson's assertion using a quantitative statistical analysis to test whether or not states that do incorporate more "traditional pre-colonial governance," whatever they may look like in a given state, are actually fundamentally less democratic. Additionally, this study seeks to supplement many of the existing literature's faults on vagueness by specifically clarifying and analyzing pre-colonial structures in each examined state, and to address the overreliance on a case-study based analysis, as was seen in Lawson's work, by constructing a more universal dataset to analyze broader themes across the South Pacific.

Synopsis of Problems within the Literature

As has been established, the existing literature on the South Pacific has its fair share of problems. Firstly, it is extremely small when compared to other regions such as Latin America or Asia, it has an evident overreliance on sloppily defined terms such as its referral to "traditional governance", which is an extremely vague concept that clearly means very different things to different authors in different contexts, and it has an overall lack of systematic clarity and methodological rigour, which could help to ameliorate the issues of vagueness and conceptual slippage that are prevalent throughout the literature. Due to these problems, disproving an assertion such as Lawson's becomes inherently difficult, even if there are existing academics who disagree with her, as there is not a pre-existing method to compare indigenization of governance across the South Pacific.

To ameliorate this, this project will create a dataset that categorizes the levels of indigenization of governance across different polities around the world. By using this dataset to

place cases alongside a spectrum, from cases that do not attempt to incorporate indigenous principles within their systems of governance to cases that have full incorporation of indigenous governing principles, we can circumvent the aforementioned issues of conceptual slippage and sloppy definitions of “traditional governance” by examining each case individually before placing them onto a spectrum. Furthermore, by applying a standardized topology to the debate between indigenization of governance and quality of democracy that can be applied to both the South Pacific as well as the entire world, this dataset can then be used to challenge assertions such as Lawson’s by making them inherently falsifiable, as well as ameliorate the existing problem of the lack of methodological rigour among literature within the field.

Data and Methodology

This chapter devises a means of testing Lawson's assertion that traditional indigenous systems of governance are incompatible with western systems of democracy. To do so, it introduces a new index, referred to as the *Incorporation of Indigenous Governance Index* (IIGI), in an attempt to quantify the degree to which a country has indigenized its systems of democracy. It then proceeds to discuss how the IIGI is calculated by analyzing each of its even individual components and then discussing how those variables are added together to arrive at the IIGI's final score. After that, it discusses how the initial dataset of 16 countries and subnational entities was constructed, justifying their score on the IIGI along the way, before concluding with an analysis of the Freedom House dataset – including both why Freedom House was selected for this project, as well as how the data will be used alongside the IIGI to test Lawson's hypothesis.

Introduction

In *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific*, Lawson argues that indigenous leaders within Polynesia who argue for maintaining traditional governing institutions are merely doing so as a form of power-grab, writing that there exists a “a substantial body of literature on the contemporary Pacific devoted to analyzing the manipulation of tradition by indigenous elites in ways that enhance their own legitimacy by sanctifying the political order to which they owe their privilege” (Lawson 2009, 12). While Lawson's assertion has certainly sparked considerable debate within the field, rigorous assessment of her argument has been hindered by unsystematic measurement of key concepts such as “traditional governance”. This study will then attempt to create a foundational level for measuring and quantifying a state's incorporation of traditional governing principles. In doing so, this study hopes to provide a way to statistically test Lawson's assertion that traditional governing principles are incompatible with western, post-colonial parliamentary institutions.

Many datasets within the field of comparative politics do not give proper statistics on many countries within Oceania. Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM), for example, only includes data for Australia, New Zealand, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji – notably leaving out any country within Polynesia or Micronesia. The lack of a pre-existing index that contains suitable data on these cases has made any sort of empirical testing of Lawson’s assertion difficult. The exclusion of these regions, as well as the notable lack of pre-existing statistics on the structure of many political institutions within these regions, were quintessential in the creation of this study’s IIGI.

It is important to note that the goal of this index is not to measure how “democratic” nor how “egalitarian” a state may be. A state could have a particularly high standard of living and quality of democracy on most other measures but have a low score on this index. Inversely, a state could have a tremendously high score on the IIGI but also have a very low quality of democracy or particularly weak institutions. The purpose of this index is to provide a method of measuring indigenization of political institutions so that they may be compared with other data sources that measure democratization, not the other way around. Therefore, whether or not a country is a full liberal or illiberal democratic regime is inherently irrelevant for this dataset, as long as they follow basic democratic institutions and principles. Additionally, considering that this project seeks to compare results from this dataset, with the Freedom House dataset – which is inherently a measure of liberal democracy and liberal democratic values, it fundamentally would not make sense for this dataset to be a measure of liberal democracy, as then we would be using liberal democracy to measure liberal democracy.

The IIGI is primarily an additive index that weighs and takes the sum of several factors and places it on a scale from 0.0-1.0. The formula (outlined below) contains seven variables,

which are then summed, applied given weights, then finally divided by 10 to arrive at I , which represents a value on a scale from 0.0-1.0. Note that the formula has several components that may seem mathematically redundant, such as dividing b_i by 3, to then later multiply it by 3. This is to emphasize that b_i is assigned a weight of three, meaning that it is three times more valuable to the index than other, non-weighted, variables, such as e , f , g , or h . Similarly, c_i and d_i are weighted at a value of 2.

$$I = \frac{\left(\sum \left(\left(\frac{b_i}{3} \right) * 3 \right) + \left(\left(\frac{c_i}{2} \right) * 2 \right) + (d_i * 2) + \left(\frac{e_i}{f_i} \right) + \left(\frac{g_i}{2} \right) + \left(\frac{h_i}{3} \right) \right)}{10}$$

Formalized Consultation

The first variable, b_i , represents *Formalized Consultation*, in essence, this measures how indigenous groups and leaders are included and consulted regarding the state's legislative process. It is measured on a scale from 0 to 3, where 0/3 reflects no attempted consultation between indigenous groups and the state's legislature.

A score of 1/3 indicates that there is no formal or official state apparatus for consultation or input from indigenous leaders, but some form of informal consultation occurs naturally in the legislative process. For instance, this would be the approach that the government of Tuvalu takes, where, according to the *Falekaupule Act*, an island's Falekaupule is supposed to provide advice on "policy and project development in accordance with its plans and programs" towards their island's two respective members of parliament (*Falekaupule Act*, s.40(c)). This form of consultation is certainly of a higher magnitude from the state having no form of consultation whatsoever, but the advice of the Falekaupule is not binding nor deemed official beyond it being used to guide relevant acts of the national parliament.

A score of 2/3 indicates that there is a formalized institution for indigenous leaders to provide input on parliamentary proceedings, but it is not legally binding, nor does it serve as a veto player within the state's constitutional framework. An example of this is the House of Ariki within the Cook Islands. The House of Ariki is a parliamentary body composed of high chiefs, *ariki*, from across the Cook Islands who are appointed by the King's Representative. In a very similar manner to the United Kingdom's House of Lords, they sit in session during parliamentary proceedings, and a member of the House of Ariki typically serves for the rest of their life once appointed. Notably, similar to the House of Lords, the House of Ariki does not have a veto on acts of parliament and is solely there to discuss the potential impact of legislation and to provide suggestions. These suggestions, however, are not legally binding and can be ignored by parliament.

Lastly, a score of 3/3 indicates that the state has formalized consultation, and a veto power encoded into its constitutional framework. While certainly rare to find in most sovereign nations, an example of this may be found in the Federated State of Micronesia's Yap State, which possesses a fourth branch of government alongside its legislative, executive, and judicial branches, that allows for direct input and veto power from indigenous leaders. Yap's Council of Pilung, which is comprised of leaders from Yap's main islands, and the Council of Tamol, which represents Yap's outlying islands. These councils, dubbed the "Traditional Councils", similarly, to the Cook Islands' House of Ariki, provide advice and guidance to the state's legislators, but unlike the House of Ariki, actually possess the power to veto legislation should the proposed legislation would violate tradition or customs (Petersen 2015, 262). Comparatively, Yap's Traditional Councils significantly more power in terms of legislation than the Falekaupule or House of Ariki, which is reflected by the given score on the index.

Due to the significantly high level of authority a branch of government like Yap's Traditional Councils may hold, this variable, *Formalized Consultation*, is assigned a weight of 3, considering the purpose of the index is to measure the formalized incorporation of indigenous governing principles with western-styles of parliamentary democracies, it makes sense to value something like the creation of a fourth branch of government significantly higher than any other variables.

Incorporation of Indigenous Principles

The second variable, c_i , represents the state's attempts to incorporate indigenous principles into the foundation of its legislature. Essentially, this asks the question of at the foundation of the state, was there an attempt to incorporate indigenous governing principles into the overall constitutional structure of the state. This is on a scale from 0-2, where a 0/2 indicates that the state is a fully western or fully colonial institution, and the structure evolved in either neglect or disregard for indigenous principles. For instance, Sweden would be granted a score of 0 on this variable, as the Swedish parliamentary system, while certainly democratic, was not designed with Sami governance or principles in mind, and little cooperation between the two systems of governance was considered during the foundation of the state's modern democratic institutions.

A score of 1/2 indicates that while the state uses primarily western institutions, there is at least a deliberate attempt to incorporate some indigenous principles into the state's institutions and tweak western democratic models to provide additional representation towards the nation's indigenous population and ensure that indigenous leaders are included within the democratic process – but not to a consultative degree. An example of this would be in Tuvalu, where although Tuvalu has a Western-style parliamentary system using plurality bloc voting, the district magnitude of each island is two, which was chosen to align with the principles of islandism and

ensure equal representation towards the different island groups (Taafaki 1996, 16). Alternatively, upon gaining their independence in 1979, Kiribati overhauled their political system entirely, doing away with the traditional isolated islandist *maneaba* system and replacing it with a more typical western parliamentary system. However, certain elements of the *maneaba* system were kept, such as leaving certain local-level decisions to the *unimwane*, the I-Kiribati word for elders within their given community (Uakeia 2016, 119).

Lastly, a score of 2/2 represents a more explicit design to incorporate indigenous principles at the national level. There is a distinction between the more subtle forms of incorporation, as seen in Kiribati, and what can be seen in a polity such as Nunavut. Arnakak writes that Inuit Qaujimanituqangit (IQ), that being a phrase that relates to the culmination of traditional Inuit knowledge, was particularly relevant in the democratic foundations of Nunavut upon its inception in 1999 (Arnakak 2002, 35). In September of 1999, The Department of Culture, Language, Elders & Youth organized an IQ workshop for government employees to discuss the best way to implement IQ into Nunavut's governance. The culmination of which was a consensus-style system of governance inspired by Lijphart's writings on consensus government (White 2010, 16). This system was explicitly chosen as it was more in-line with IQ and thus was seen as a better fit for the new polity.

Regional Consultation

The third variable, d_i , represents the degree of Regional Consultation that a government would conduct when doing construction, business, or development on lands that are directly inhabited or controlled by indigenous leaders. This is a simple binary variable and simply measures whether or not this sort of consultation happens in the first place. This variable is assigned a weight of 2, as while it is not directly related to the national legislative process, its purpose is to

serve more as a penalty towards states that neglect to consider consultation at even the most basic of levels.

A score of 0/1 would indicate that the state does not conduct any form of official consultation whatsoever when operating on indigenous land. An example of this would be Chile, where logging operations in traditional Mapuche territory are frequently done without consultation towards indigenous leaders in Puelmapu, and has infamously led to a series of protests, riots, as well as violence and acts of arson against logging trucks (Schmalz et al 2022, 378.)

A score of 1/1 simply indicates that the state does consult with indigenous groups when operating on indigenous land. This measure is more focused on *de jure* restrictions on national governments opposed to *de facto* restrictions. Essentially, this means a country like Canada would receive a score of 1/1, as constitutionally speaking Canada is required to consult with indigenous groups when conducting any sort of resource extraction on indigenous land, even if that consultation does not always happen or go through the necessary bureaucratic channels.

Indigenous Representation and Indigenous Population

The next two variables, e_i and f_i , represent the percent of a state's legislature that identifies as indigenous, and the percent of a state's total population that identifies as indigenous respectively.

The e variable, dubbed *IndigenousRepresentation*, is divided by the f variable, *IndigenousPopulation*, and then added into the rest of the index. The purpose of this is to measure parity between the demographics of the legislature and the demographics of the total population. Note that the variable has a theoretical maximum cutoff value of 1. If, hypothetically, the *IndigenousRepresentation* variable is higher than the *IndigenousPopulation* variable, which is the case in Tuvalu, where 100% of the legislature is ethnically Tuvaluan, which only makes up

about 97% of the state's total population, the formula returns a flat value of 1. This is to prevent states from being rewarded if their indigenous population is overrepresented in parliament.

Symbolic Measures

The next variable, g_i , represents symbolic measures implemented into the state's legislature.

Namely, the variable examines the usage of language and traditional symbols into the legislature.

This is measured on a scale from 0-2, where 0 represents the state does not officially recognize indigenous symbols or legislatures within their parliaments. This is the case in Canada for instance, where although some polities officially recognize indigenous languages, the federal parliament only recognizes English and French as official languages. Additionally, during normal parliamentary proceedings (that being, on an average non-holiday), the parliament does not acknowledge nor harbor any indigenous symbols or flags.

A score of 1/2 represents that the nation's legislature does officially acknowledge certain indigenous symbols, typically flags, but does not officially recognize any official languages. For the purposes of this index the presence of indigenous languages was considered to be of a higher value than indigenous symbols, as the presence of indigenous languages would require staffers and clerks to be familiar enough with the language, which would indicate a higher degree of effort than merely hanging or acknowledging an indigenous flag in addendum to the state's national flag. An example of a nation that would score a 1/2 would be French Polynesia. In the French Polynesian parliament, certain indigenous symbols are recognized and flown during normal parliamentary procedures, such as the Tahitian coat of arms, but the only official language recognized during parliamentary procedures is French.

Lastly, a score of 2/2 represents that the state's parliament officially recognizes at least one indigenous language and incorporates indigenous symbols into its daily proceedings. An

example of this would be New Zealand, where MPs in New Zealand have the right to use Te Reo Māori in parliament, and the Tino Rangatiratanga flag is flown alongside the New Zealand national flag.

Indigenous Autonomy

The final variable, h_i represents how much autonomy indigenous leaders have on their respective territory. This functions more at the local level in a similar fashion to the Regional Consult variable. This is on a scale from 0-3 and measures the legislative power that indigenous leaders have over their territories. A score of 0/3 would represent that indigenous leaders do not have any form of power nor autonomy in their territories – or that the state does not have designated areas for indigenous groups in the first place. An example of this would once again be Chile, where although areas like Rapa Nui are predominantly populated by its indigenous population, the Chilean government does not offer them any form of self-governance as Chile is a purely unitary state.

A score of 1/3 represents that indigenous groups or leaders possess limited local or symbolic authority over their territories but are still directly subject to intervention from the national government. It is important to note that this distinction is independent of the previous regional consult variable, as that purely measures whether consultation is happening in the first place. An example of a state that would score a 1/3 would be New Zealand, which although is divided into multiple iwis, is still legislatively subjugate to national law that passes from Wellington.

A score of 2/3 represents recognized and legal jurisdiction over key areas, but not quite a fully asymmetrical federative unit within the legal framework of the state. An example of this is the Falekaupule in Tuvalu, who assume jurisdiction over matters related to healthcare, education,

fisheries, communication, transportation, and infrastructure over their respective islands – but notably, as Tuvalu is a unitary system, they are still subjugate to the wills of the national government.

A score of 3/3 was not observed in the provided dataset, however, theoretically, a score of 3/3 would require indigenous leaders to have full autonomy regardless to their respective national or federal governments in their respective states. This would have to occur in a very decentralized federative model, which was not observed during the creation of the dataset.

Finalizing the Formula

To explain the math behind the formula, it is important to explain why these variables, after being assigned their given values and weights, are then divided. Without these added measures, the maximum score a state can reach is 10, while the minimum scores a state can reach is zero. While this is still fundamentally usable, and ultimately the same mathematically, it was felt that an index that ranges from 0-1 opposed to 0-10 is far more accessible and easier to understand for the end-user. Hence, why the sum of the variables is divided by 10 to arrive at a maximum score of 1 – as this is far easier to see and ascertain its meaning immediately.

Typology

The index produces values ranging between 0 and 1, where the maximum and minimum values should be understood as ideal types. A hypothetical score of 0 indicates that the given state makes essentially zero effort to either indigenize their system of governance, or consult with indigenous groups when making legislative decisions while a score of 1 indicates that the given state goes through considerable effort make sure that indigenous groups are on equal playing field as the national legislature, and heavily incorporates pre-colonial or indigenous governing principles at the national level. The values in between can be grouped into a typology with five

categories, as summarized in Figure 2.1. Importantly, these categories do not always have equal ranges; this is a deliberate quality of the formula and is meant to mathematically reflect the possible outcomes of different combinations of variables. For instance, for a country to have a score of <0.10 , it would have to offer no form of consultation between the legislature and indigenous groups – even at the informal level, nor any form of regional consultation when working on indigenous land. This state would have to be significantly lower than any other state for neglecting even the simplest of concessions, and therefore the lowest category would have to reflect this.

The first, and lowest scoring category is referred to as *Non-Cooperative States*, these are states that explicitly prevent or neglect to even consider cooperation between indigenous groups and state legislature, at even the most basic level. Additionally, they would also have to grant no sort of autonomy towards indigenous groups whatsoever. It ranges from a score of 0.0-0.10 and reflects states that, as aforementioned, do not attempt any form of consultation on the national nor local level. While there was no state that earned this score in the primary dataset, the model was theoretically modeled after historical Apartheid-era South Africa, particularly between 1950 and 1970; although there certainly could be cases where this occurs in the modern day.

The next category of states is referred to as *Low Consultative States*. This range is the largest and goes from 0.11-0.40. These states grant minor concessions towards indigenous groups, such as direct consultation when working on indigenous lands, or at the judicial level having some indirect input on the legality and constitutionality of new laws, but there is little to no form of formal dialogue occurring at the legislative level. The states from the primary dataset that would be referred to as *Low Consultative States* are Canada, French Polynesia, and Sweden. This reflects the difference in measuring democracy and measuring incorporation of democratic

institutions as the three aforementioned states are all relatively democratic, particularly Canada and Sweden – both of whom have a long history of liberal democratic principles. However, the two also have a long history of mistreating their indigenous populations, neither of which are granted any sort of enforced representation within their respective legislatures. Canada for instance has a score of 0.275, and Sweden has a score of 0.175. These three states are distinct from other states in the dataset, as all three of them do not grant any form of official consultation between indigenous groups and parliamentarians, nor were indigenous principles particularly relevant during the construction of their political institutions.

The third group of states are referred to as *Moderate States*. These states, as the name suggests, incorporate a moderate level of indigenous governing principles, and fall near the middle of the spectrum, within the range of 0.41-0.60. The “ideal-typical” model of a moderate state would grant legislative concessions towards indigenous groups – typically through new mechanisms that are built into pre-existing western legislative structures that are meant to ensure that indigenous groups can at least participate in the legislative process. However, these states typically do not create new legislative mechanisms, nor separate branches of government to ensure indigenous input on legislature. Notable states from the primary dataset that fall within this category are New Zealand, Nunavut, and Kiribati. New Zealand’s score is largely held up by the existence of the Māori seats, which while not being reflective of specific iwis within New Zealand, does ensure at least a moderate level of consultation, and ensures that Māori groups have a voice in the national legislature.

The fourth category within the dataset is referred to as *Co-operative Consultative States*. These states have clear institutions for cooperation and communication between the legislative body and local indigenous groups, but they lack significant veto powers or law-making powers.

These states fall within the range of 0.61-0.80, and notably include Tuvalu, the Cook Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia, among others. The aforementioned House of Ariki within the Cook Islands is a near perfect example of what this category represents, as the House of Ariki is a formalized institution within the legislative process – but does not hold significant veto powers. Similarly, the Falekaupule Act in Tuvalu specifically states that the Falekaupule of each island are supposed to give advice and input to their respective island’s parliamentarians, but once again, like the House of Ariki, these lack significant veto powers, and are supposed to serve more as general guiding principles. The formality and constitutional enshrinement of these institutions, however, is what sets these countries apart from other states in the *Moderate States* category like New Zealand or Nunavut. However, the lack of significant veto power is what separates these states from states in the final category.

The final category is referred to as *Consultative Egalitarian States*. These states, similarly to the previous category, have specific institutions that are fundamentally based on ensuring that indigenous leaders have the opportunity to voice concerns and offer guidance to the nation’s legislative body, and would have an Index Score of >0.80. However, these states notably offer increased power to these institutions, often making them key veto players when it comes to passing legislation. The two states within the dataset that fall within this category are the Kingdom of Tonga, and the Federated States of Micronesia’s Yap State. Yap, as previously mentioned, has a fourth branch of government, the Traditional Councils, which is explicitly made to represent indigenous interests at a state-wide level. Tonga, however, is a semi-constitutional monarchy. Unlike a full constitutional monarchy, as seen in Canada, the Tongan monarch exercises “considerable executive power, which makes the political system an amalgam of monarchical authority and parliamentary democracy” (Ratuva 2016, 341). Seeing as the Tongan

royal family, or at least some form of Tongan monarchy, has been in power since the 12th century at the latest, 10th century at the earliest (Ratuva 2016, 339), the Tongan monarchy can, and should, absolutely be seen as Tonga's equivalent to the Falekaupule, as it is a legitimate source of traditional authority within Tonga. The Tongan monarch, similarly, to the Traditional Councils, explicitly exercises a veto power on legislation, which is why these two states are the strongest states in the dataset in terms of their incorporation of traditional government principles.

Table 2.1: A table showing outlining the typology of the IIGI, with given ranges, a brief description, and examples for states that could fall into each category.

Group Name	Range	Description	Examples
Non-Cooperative State	0-0.10	This state grants little to no form of consultation nor legislative representation towards its indigenous population.	None in data set, Apartheid South Africa used as example.
Non-Consultative Democracy	0.11-0.40	This state grants minor concessions towards indigenous groups, such as direct consultation when working on indigenous lands, but there is little to no form of formal dialogue occurring at the legislative level.	Canada, Sweden, French Polynesia
Moderate State	0.41-0.60	This state grants a moderate level of legislative concessions towards indigenous groups, typically through increased measures within pre-existing western institutions to ensure Indigenous voices can be heard.	New Zealand
Co-operative Consultative State	0.61-0.80	This state has clear institutions for cooperation and communication between the legislative body and local indigenous groups, but they lack significant veto powers and law-making powers.	Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Fiji
Consultative Egalitarian State	0.81-1.00	This state's institutions directly include local indigenous groups into the national assembly; as well as granting indigenous leaders and groups a direct veto power. These can either act as an equal branch of government, or they may replace the legislative or executive branches entirely.	Tonga, Yap, FSM, Palau, Samoa

Dataset

This dataset was constructed using information from 16 governments from around the world.

Most are fully independent states in Oceania, although several sub-national and non-independent overseas territories with substantial indigenous populations from other world regions are also

included. The purpose of this index is to capture the level of incorporation of indigenous principles in countries all around the world, not solely within the South Pacific.

A few important criteria were considered when deciding what countries could be and could not be included within this dataset. Firstly, this index is designed to measure incorporation of indigenous principles within democratic systems. Therefore, cases like Brunei, an absolute monarchy, were excluded from consideration. Additionally, there is a clear focus on western-style parliamentary systems, which naturally excluded countries like China from consideration. Several of the states analyzed within the dataset are not independent, and are overseas territories of foreign countries, or are subnational federative levels. In the instance of subnational authorities, which in the context of this dataset includes the Canadian territory of Nunavut as well as the Micronesian state of Yap, the relations between local indigenous leaders and the local government of the respective subnational territory were examined. This is particularly relevant as in the Canadian case, the existence of Nunavut is supposed to ensure the incorporation of indigenous Inuk principles for the entire country. This distinction is particularly important as not only do Inuk people live all across Canada, not just in Nunavut, but also because in order to compare subnational states like Nunavut to independent polities like Tuvalu, it is important to analyze the relation local indigenous leaders have to their closest legislative bodies to ensure that they may be compared fairly.

Freedom House Variables

After constructing the index and applying the relevant values to each individual country that is part of the sample, this project will then compare the data with the pre-existing *Freedom House* dataset. Freedom House was largely chosen for pragmatic reasons, as unlike V-DEM, it is one of the only mainstream datasets that both contain data for a wide range of countries within the

South Pacific, and also directly focuses on variables related to democratization and the strength of liberal democratic institutions. For this project, the resulting score of this project's dataset will be compared to the disaggregated variables found in the Freedom House dataset that are used to come to Freedom House's overall score. In doing so, it is the goal of this project to fundamentally challenge Lawson's assertion that "traditional" governing structures are incompatible with liberal democracies, by demonstrating that there is no statistically significant relationship between a state's civil liberties and political rights, with its incorporation of indigenous governing principles.

The Freedom House dataset is constructed by having regional experts respond to a given survey. This survey asks the experts questions such as "Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?" (Freedom House 2025), to which the expert responds by giving the given country a score from 0-4 on the provided criteria. The score given by the expert for the given question is then added together with the given scores on all other questions, to arrive at the country's final Freedom House Score. The questions are arranged into seven different categories, which then make up Freedom House's disaggregated components. These components are, as follows, *Electoral Process*, *Political Pluralism and Participation*, *Functioning of Government*, *Freedom of Expression and Belief*, *Associational and Organizational Rights*, *Rule of Law*, and *Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights*.

The first of the components, *Electoral Process*, measures how free and fair the given state's elections are, as well as the democratic legitimacy of their national legislatures and head of government. For instance, questions in this category are things like "Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?" and "Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?" (Freedom

House 2025). There are three questions in this category, and they are all measured on a scale from 0-4, to arrive at a total component score of 12.

The second of the components, *Political Pluralism and Participation*, measures freedom of political thought, as well as if citizens are allowed to oppose the incumbent government. Questions in this category include “Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?” and “Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?” (Freedom House 2025). There are four questions in this category, and they are all measured on a scale from 0-4, to arrive at a total component score of 16.

The third component, *Functioning of Government*, measures protections against corruption within the government, as well as government transparency and autonomy. Questions in this category include “Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?” and “Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?” (Freedom House 2025). There are three questions in this category, and they are all measured on a scale from 0-4, to arrive at a total component score of 12.

The fourth component, *Freedom of Expression and Belief*, measures freedom of the press, as well as the individual’s freedom of expression. Questions in this category include “Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?” and “Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?” (Freedom House 2025). There are four questions in

this category, and they are all measured on a scale from 0-4, to arrive at a total component score of 16.

The fifth component, *Associational and Organizational Rights*, measures freedom of assembly as well as freedom for trade unions. Questions in this category include “Is there freedom of assembly?” and “Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?” (Freedom House 2025). There are three questions in this category, and they are all measured on a scale from 0-4, to arrive at a total component score of 12.

The sixth component, *Rule of Law*, measures the independence of the judiciary, as well as how efficient and equitable laws are applied within the given state. Questions in this category include “Is there an independent judiciary?” and “Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?” (Freedom House 2025). There are four questions in this category, and they are all measured on a scale from 0-4, to arrive at a total component score of 16.

The seventh and final component, *Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights*, measures individual freedoms and how protected things such as bodily autonomy and property rights are within the given state. Questions in this category include “Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?” and “Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?” (Freedom House 2025). There are four questions in this category, and they are all measured on a scale from 0-4, to arrive at a total component score of 16.

Methodology

The IIGI was created with the express purpose of providing a way to empirically test Lawson’s assertion that pre-colonial chiefly systems of governance are incompatible with democracy. The

hypothesis of this thesis is that Lawson's assertion is ultimately incorrect, and that there is no connection between the IIGI, the independent variable, and the Freedom House score, the dependent variable.

In a theoretical sense, there does not seem to be any good reason as to why a state indigenizing its systems of governance and providing more consultation at the local level with indigenous groups would result in the state having an overall lower quality of democracy, especially after analyzing the individual Freedom House components and identifying what they are specifically measuring. For instance, it does not make any sense that increasing consultation with indigenous leaders would lead to a decrease in Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights.

The size of the dataset, however, had to be decreased from the initial 16 observations down to 12, as Freedom House did not have data for Nunavut, Yap, the Cook Islands, or French Polynesia. After arriving at the final dataset of 12 cases, given that both the independent and dependent variables were indices, it made logical sense to test Lawson's assertion using an OLS Regression. The following chapter will analyze the results of this regression, as well as describing the reasoning behind the overall methodology – before doing further examination using a Pairwise correlation matrix.

Results

The previous chapter introduced the IIGI, which was specifically designed to be able to empirically test Lawson's assertion that traditional methods of "Pacific Way" style governance are inherently incompatible with western systems of democracy. This chapter uses a series of statistical tests to determine whether or not Lawson's assertion holds any weight. It begins with a discussion of the appropriate method of testing Lawson's claims. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of results. Contrary to the initial hypothesis of this study, which anticipated that there would be no statistically significant relationship between the IIGI and the Freedom House Variables (i.e., that Lawson is wrong – or at the very least greatly overstates the relationship), the results of the statistical analysis appear to support Lawson's assertion. The implications of this surprising result will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

Control Variables

To properly account for variance, this chapter will use a series of control variables. Part of the general model-building process depends on selecting variables that could have a significant effect on the dependent variable. The variables that were selected for these models are *Years Colonized*, a variable counting the number of years in which the given state was under colonial rule until achieving responsible government, the *GINI Index*, which measures income inequality, *GDPpc*, which measures the gross domestic product per capita of the given state, and *Population (Millions)* which measures the total population of the given state according to census data. These variables were chosen as potential control variables as they are all particularly relevant in explaining differences in quality of democracy, particularly within the South Pacific.

Years Colonized was selected as colonial legacy certainly can affect the quality of democratic institutions. A state that was never directly colonized, such as Tonga, would naturally

have less colonial influence than a state that was directly colonized or annexed by a foreign power, such as Tuvalu. Lawson's assertion is, at least partly, based upon the assumption that quality of democracy is bolstered by western political institutions. However, to properly test Lawson's assertion, colonial legacy should be considered a factor as well.

The GINI Index and GDPpc were selected as a large amount of academic literature argues that levels of income inequality adversely affect quality of democracy, according to modernization theory, "democracy is related to economic development" (Przeworski and Limongi 1997, 155) and economic development will eventually lead to a bolstering of the middle-class who will in turn support democracy (Nathan 2016, 5).

Lastly, Population (in Millions) was selected to account for the wide range in population that countries within the data set have, from Tuvalu having a population of ~11k, to Canada having a population of ~41 million.

Model Building: Correlation

Both the independent and dependent variables described in the previous chapter are indices, which means the hypothesis can be tested using measures suitable for ratio or interval data, including OLS Regression. This is also true of the disaggregated components of the Freedom House index. Before proceeding with a regression, however, it is necessary to consider potential issues of non-linearity, multicollinearity, heteroskedasticity, etc.; that would make OLS regression unsuitable. Table 4.1 uses pairwise correlation to test multicollinearity—that is, correlation between the independent variables. While correlation between the dependent and independent variables is desirable, correlation between independent variables presents a problem for statistical testing. As Table 4.1 shows, there are a few issues with multicollinearity that complicate any analysis using OLS regression.

Table 4.1: Correlation Matrix of Disaggregated Freedom House components compared to the IIGI Score

	<i>Freedom House (DV)</i>	<i>IIGI (IV)</i>	<i>Years Colonized</i>	<i>GDPpc</i>	<i>GINI</i>	<i>Population (Millions)</i>
Freedom House	1					
IIGI	-0.6035	1				
Years Colonized	0.2116	0.0013	1			
GDPpc	0.6543	-0.7581	0.2502	1		
GINI	0.0606	0.5832	0.1941	-0.3403	1	
Population (Millions)	0.3375	-0.6405	-0.0618	0.5774	-0.3573	1

n=12

Table 4.1 is a pairwise correlation matrix, showing the degree to which each variable is correlated with the others. Note that the variable names appear in both columns and rows, and that each variable is perfectly correlated with itself (a value of 1 indicates 100% correlation). The Freedom House (DV) column demonstrates the relationship between the Freedom House score and the independent variables, including the IIGI as well as several control variables.

As Table 4.1 shows, there is a strong negative correlation between the Freedom House score (our dependent variable) and the IIGI score (our independent variable). The value of -0.6035 signifies that $\sim 60\%$ of the variance in the Freedom House score can be explained by variation in the IIGI score, which is a tremendously strong correlation. Furthermore, the relationship is negative, which suggests that as the IIGI score increases, Freedom House score decreases (per Lawson). Additionally, there is a strong correlation between the Freedom House data and GDP per capita, with a value of 0.65 , meaning that $\sim 65\%$ of the variance in the Freedom House score can be explained by variation in GDP per capita. Unlike the relationship between the Freedom House score and the IIGI score, this value is positive – which indicates that as GDP per capita increases, so does quality of democracy.

Additionally, there is a moderate correlation between the Freedom House data and the number of years the state was colonized and the population variables. Respectively, these values are 0.21 and 0.33 which indicates that $\sim 21\%$ of variance in the Freedom House data is due to

variation within the number of years the given state was colonized, and ~33% of variance in the Freedom House data is due to the state's population.

Furthermore, there is a particularly weak correlation between the Freedom House data and the GINI coefficient, with it having a value of 0.06. This indicates that only ~6% of the variance in the Freedom House score is due to variance in the GINI coefficient.

Table 4.1 also reveals potential problems with multicollinearity. Multicollinearity occurs when the predictor variables are highly correlated with one another, which is problematic as the high correlation between independent variables makes it particularly difficult to determine the individual effect that each predictor has on the dependent variable, and leads to wildly unstable models if left untreated. There are several instances of multicollinearity that can be noted in Table 4.1. Notably, GDP per capita is strongly correlated with Population (Millions), with a value of 0.5774. Since these are highly correlated with one another, these two variables should not be included in the same model, as it would make it extremely difficult to tell what the individual effect of either variable would have on the dependent variable. Furthermore, GDP per capita was also moderately correlated with the GINI index, as it has a value of -0.3403 . This once again suggests that the two variables should not be included together within the same model. Lastly, given that the Years Colonized variable was not strongly correlated with either variable, it was felt that it was likely not a relevant predictor variable.

Model Building: Linearity and Errors

After identifying issues of multicollinearity, potential issues of non-linearity, heteroskedasticity, and systematic bias in the error term must be identified. To do this, a series of scatter plots were constructed that demonstrated the relationship between the Freedom House score and each individual independent variable – barring Years Colonized. All three issues can be

diagnosed visually. In the case of non-linearity, this is done by examining the line of best fit. In the case of heteroskedasticity, this is done by examining variance in the residuals (that is, the distance between the data points and the line) to ensure that the errors are evenly distributed for all values of the independent variable. Heteroskedasticity can typically be identified by a “fan” or “cone-shaped” form on a scatterpoint graph. Finally, systematic bias in the error term occurs when observations are not scattered randomly around the line of best fit but are instead disproportionately higher or lower than the line.

Figure 4.1: A scatterpoint graph showing the relationship between the Freedom House score and the IIGI score.

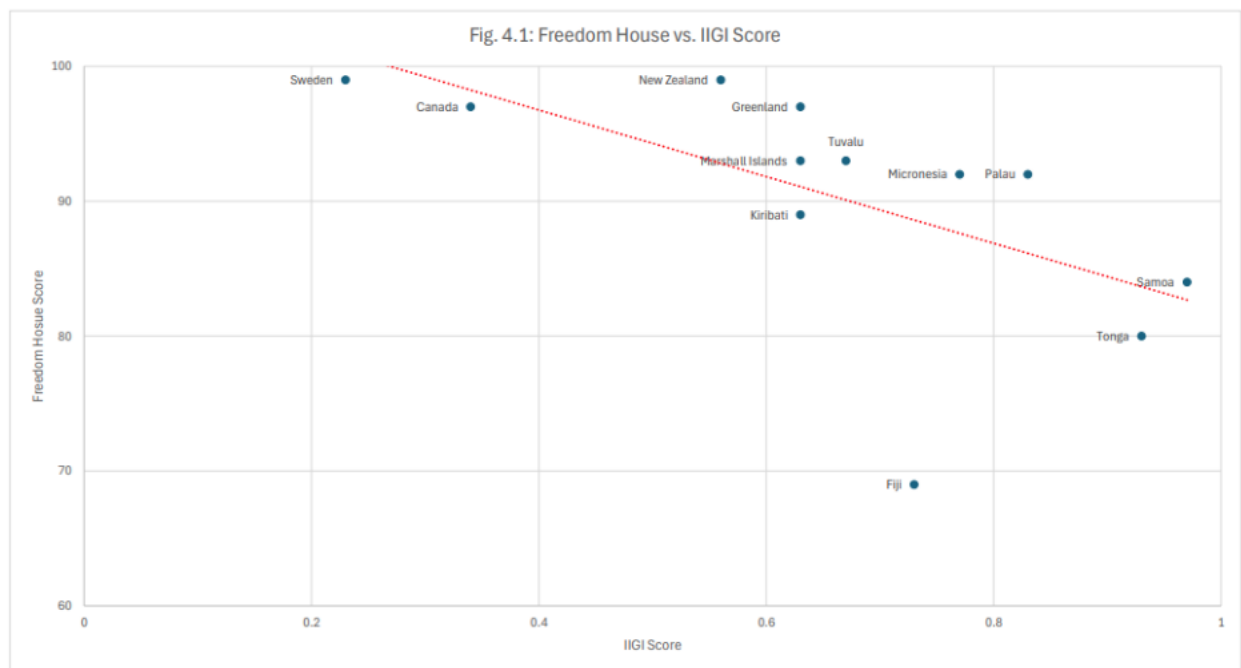


Figure 4.1 shows the relationship between the Freedom House score and the IIGI score. The line of best fit in this graph is certainly linear and shows the negative relationship between the two variables that was previously noted within Table 4.1. Additionally, it can be seen that there is no evidence of heteroskedasticity nor systematic bias within this graph. The observations are all clustered equally along the line of best fit, and the spread of observations remains mostly consistent, showing no evidence of the fan-like shape that is common with heteroskedasticity.

Figure 4.2: A scatterpoint graph showing the relationship between the Freedom House score and GDP per Capita.

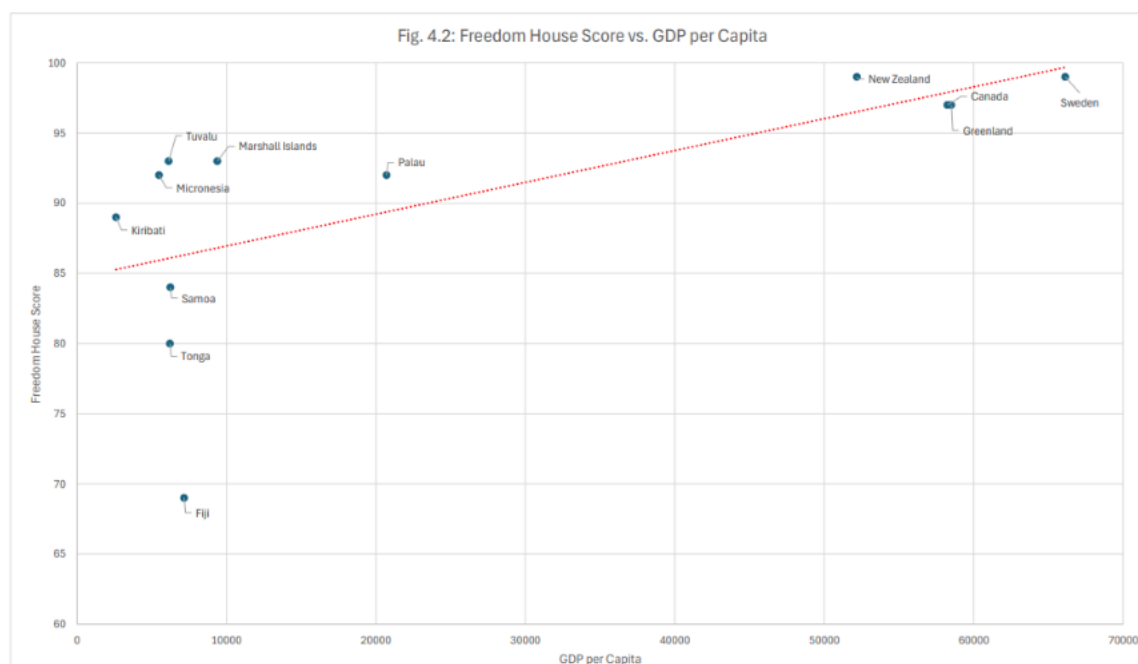
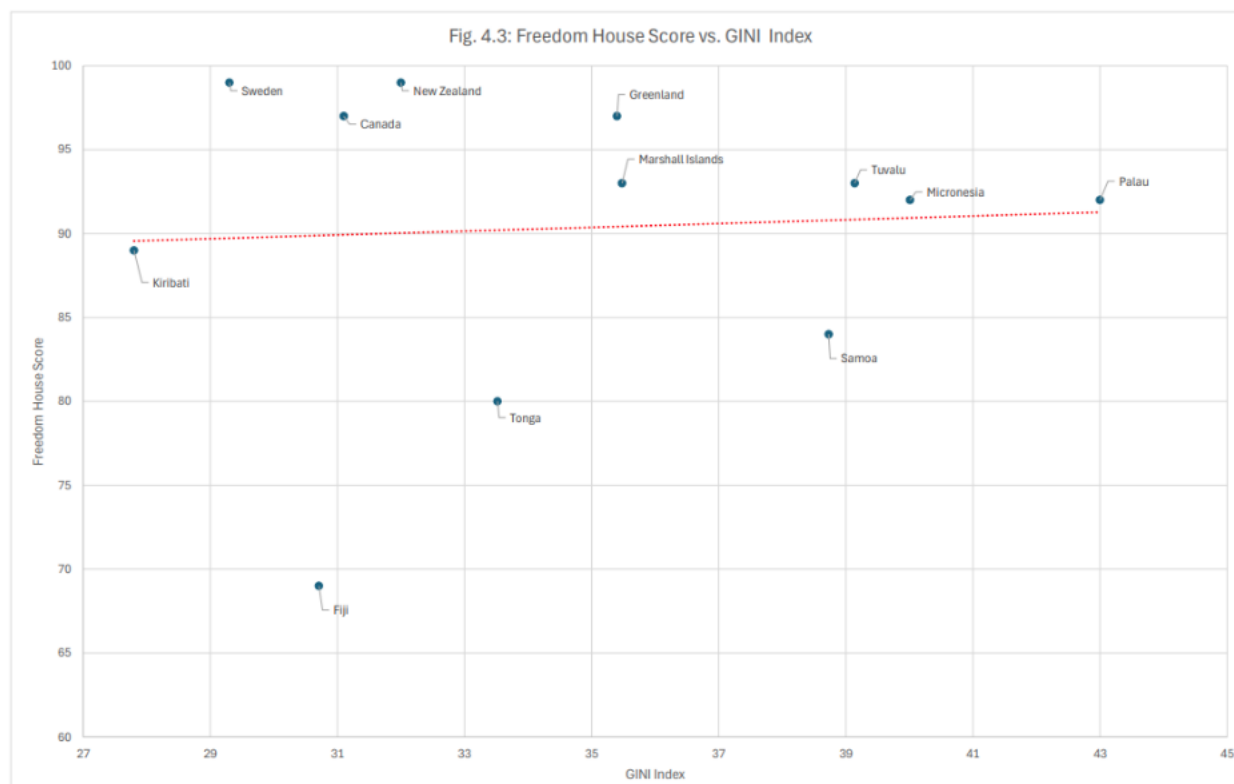


Figure 4.2, however, examines the relationship between GDP per Capita and the Freedom House. As can be seen, the cases are heavily clustered around the extremes of the spectrum, with all the cases within the South Pacific clustered on the lower end of GDPpc, and all the other cases being clustered on the higher end, which is not ideal for usage in a model. Although there is no clear evidence of systematic bias within this relationship, as there are a roughly equal number of observations both above and below the line of best fit on both sides of the graph, the distribution remains somewhat concerning.

Figure 4.3: A scatterpoint graph showing the relationship between the Freedom House score and the GINI Index.



The relationship between the Freedom House Score and the GINI Index shown in Figure 4.3 is certainly linear, as the line of best fit is almost completely flat. Additionally, there is little evidence of heteroskedasticity present, as even though there are some outliers notably Fiji – the majority of observations are clustered tightly around the line of best fit. Furthermore, there is little evidence of systematic bias in error term, as there are cases above and below the line of best fit at all levels of the IV. However, the line of best fit being nearly flat does reflect what was observed in the correlation matrix, where there was a noticeably modest relationship between the Freedom House Score and the GINI Index.

Figure 4.4: A scatterpoint graph showing the relationship between the Freedom House score and Population in Millions.

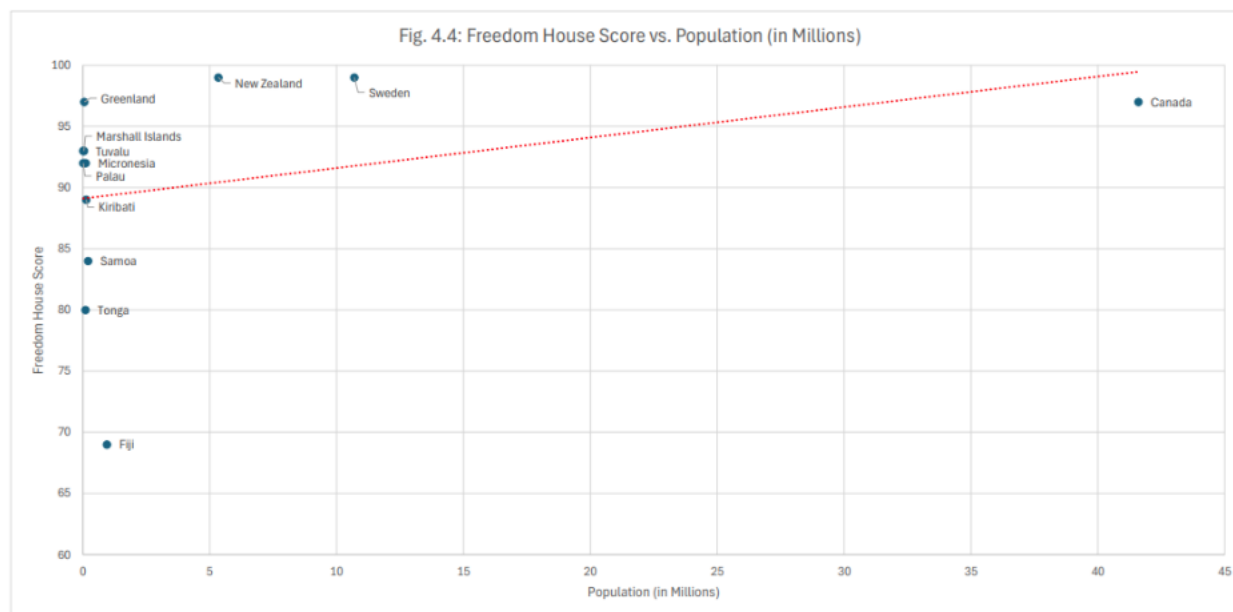


Figure 4.4 shows the relationship between the Freedom House score and Population in Millions. Notably, however, there is a significant lack of variance between most of the observations within the dataset, as the overwhelming majority of cases have a population of <1 million. Due to this, Population in Millions as a control variable would be largely irrelevant, as there is not enough variance to justify its inclusion in any models.

OLS Regression

Table 4.2: Two different models of regression comparing the Freedom House scores with the IIGI index, with Years Colonized and GINI as control variables.

	Model 1	Model 2
IIGI	-24.7*	-39.6**
Years Colonized		
GINI		1.17*
Intercept	106.6***	76.1***
R-squared	0.3642	0.6222
Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; $n = 12$		

After diagnosing potential issues of multicollinearity and heteroskedasticity, this study could then move forwards with the OLS Regression. Table 4.2 shows two different models of regression, each with different control variables.

Model 1 is the base model and solely analyzes the relationship between the Freedom House score and the IIGI score. As can be seen by the asterisk next to the value, the relationship is statistically significant, which means that the null hypothesis can be rejected. There is a statistically significant negative relationship between the two. Additionally, the value of -24.7 means that as the IIGI score increases from 0 to 1 (that is, from the theoretical minimum to the theoretical maximum), the Freedom House score falls 24.7 points from its mean value. Considering that the mean Freedom House value on this dataset is 92.5, that is a substantial decrease in predicted quality of democracy.

Model 2 opted to use the GINI Coefficient as a control variable as a high level of income inequality is typically an indicator of a low quality of democracy, and vice versa. Model 32 once again states that there is a relationship between the Freedom House score and the IIGI score, indicating that the null hypothesis can be rejected with a 99% level of confidence. The shockingly high value of -39.6 indicates that the relationship is once again negative, and that the model predicts that as the IIGI score increases from 0 to 1, that the Freedom House score will fall by a whopping 39.6 points. Furthermore, Model 2 states that there is a statistically significant relationship between the Freedom House score and the IIGI score – and that the null hypothesis, that there is no relationship between these variables, can be rejected with a 95% level of confidence. Surprisingly, however, the model states that as the GINI coefficient goes up, so does the Freedom House score. In other words, as income inequality increases, so does quality of democracy. This is a particularly interesting result that seems to run counter towards most academic literature on how income inequality interacts with quality of democracy.

Model 2 is likely the best fit, as unlike Model 1 the relationship between the independent and dependent variables can be accepted as statistically significant with a higher level of confidence. Overall, these results are particularly surprising and seem to fully support Lawson's assertion that traditional methods of governance are incompatible with western systems of democracy within the South Pacific. Importantly, however, the extremely high value of -39.6 is likely a higher value than even Lawson would have predicted, which suggests that there may be some fundamental flaws with how Freedom House is measuring quality of democracy. This chapter will now analyze the relationship between the IIGI and the different disaggregated Freedom House components to analyze what is driving this relationship.

Discussion

The finding of a significant, negative relationship between the IIGI and Freedom House score raises questions about what exactly accounts for this relationship. To investigate the cause further, this section looks at the individual disaggregated components of the Freedom House dataset to determine what exactly is driving this negative relationship.

Table 4.3: Correlation Matrix: Pairwise comparison of IIGI vs. disaggregated components of Freedom House using Pearson's R.

	IIGI Score	Electoral Process	Pluralism and Participation	Functioning of Governance	Freedom of Expression	Associational Rights	Rule of Law	Personal Autonomy
IIGI Score	1							
Electoral Process	-0.56	1						
Pluralism and Participation	-0.59*	0.90***	1					
Functioning of Governance	-0.73**	0.81**	0.82**	1				
Freedom of Expression	-0.46	0.9113***	0.75**	0.75**	1			
Associational Rights	-0.34	0.58*	0.75**	0.62*	0.44	1		
Rule of Law	-0.29	0.83***	0.85***	0.63*	0.63*	0.72**	1	
Personal Autonomy	-0.72**	0.71**	0.86***	0.81**	0.50	0.72**	0.67*	1

Notes: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001; n=12

Table 4.3 shows a correlation matrix analyzing the relation of the IIGI and the different disaggregated components of Freedom House. Like Table 4.1, this is a pairwise comparison using Pearson's R, which means it is a bivariate comparison of individual relationships, as opposed to the previous OLS Regression which uses other control variables to mediate the effect on the dependent variable. For purposes of increased clarity, all relationships that are statistically significant in the first column have been highlighted. This represents the degree to which the Freedom House components are correlated with the independent variable. The remaining columns, which show the correlation between the different disaggregated components of the Freedom House Dataset, are not highlighted – whether they are correlated with one another is largely irrelevant to the hypothesis.

The Pearson's R matrix, which can be seen in Table 4.3, revealed particularly interesting and rather surprising details about the relationship between our variables. The first result of note is the relationship between the IIGI Score and Freedom House's *Electoral Process* variable, which measures how free and fair elections are within a given state. As can be seen in Table 4.3, there is not a statistically significant relationship between the two.

Second, is the relationship between the IIGI Score and Freedom House's *Pluralism and Participation* variable, which measures aspects such as if political opposition parties have realistic opportunities to succeed, if people have options to vote for candidates that align with their beliefs, and whether or not minority groups have equal political rights to the majority. As can be seen in Table 4.3, the relationship between these variables is statistically significant, and negative, meaning that as the IIGI Score for a given state increases, that their levels of pluralism and equal participation for political opponents and minorities would decrease. Furthermore, as can be seen by the value of -0.59, this is once again a particularly strong relationship between the variables as ~59% of the variation in Pluralism and Participation stems from variation in the IIGI Score, and certainly is not a negligible effect on the quality of democracy.

Third is the relationship between the IIGI Score and Freedom House's *Functioning of Government* variable, which measures things like the presence of checks-and-balances against the executive and legislative bodies, government transparency, and if there are proper safeguards to combat corruption within the state. As can be seen in Table 4.3, the relationship between these variables is statistically significant and negative, meaning that as a state's IIGI Score increases, its checks and balances and government transparency decrease. Furthermore, this relationship is even stronger than the relationship between the IIGI Score and the previous two variables, being at -0.73, which signifies that there is a very strong and noticeable decline in Functioning of

Government. It is also important to note how particularly strong this variable is, meaning that ~73% of the variation in Functioning of Government is solely due to the IIGI Score.

Fourth is the relationship between the IIGI Score and Freedom House's *Freedom of Expression* variable. This variable is relatively self-explanatory, and measures freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech within a given state. As can be seen in Table 4.3, this relationship is not statistically significant.

Fifth is the relationship between the IIGI Score and Freedom House's *Associational Rights* variable. This variable measures freedom of assembly as well as the level of freedoms that workers' unions and NGOs have within the given state. Once again, as can be seen by the lack of asterisks, this relationship is not statistically significant – and therefore the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between the IIGI Score and Associational Rights within a given state cannot be rejected.

Sixth is the relationship between the IIGI Score and Freedom House's *Rule of Law* variable. This variable measures levels of due process, whether or not laws are applied equal to minority groups, and the existence and independence of the judiciary branch. As can be seen in Table 4.3, there is no statistically significant relationship between the two variables, and once again the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between the IIGI Score and Rule of Law in a given state cannot be rejected.

Last is the relationship between the IIGI Score and Freedom House's *Personal Autonomy* variable. This variable measures things like freedom of movement, right to own property, bodily autonomy, and economic freedoms. As evidenced by Table 4.3, there is a strong statistically significant relationship between the two variables, The relationship is negative, meaning that as

IIGI Score increases, things like freedom of movement, economic freedom, and bodily autonomy decrease. Furthermore, as shown by the value of -0.72 , this is a very strong negative relationship, as $\sim 72\%$ of the variation in Personal Autonomy is due to variance within the IIGI score.

The existence of strong negative relationships between the IIGI score and Pluralism and Participation, Functioning of Governance, and Personal Autonomy is particularly surprising. Given that the relationship between the IIGI score and the rest of the disaggregated components was not significant, these three variables are likely what is driving the shockingly high negative relationship between the IIGI score and the overall Freedom House score that was observed in Table 4.3. The next chapter of this study will further explore the Freedom House data in more detail and will continue to examine the surprising nature of these results.

Analysis

Reflection on Results

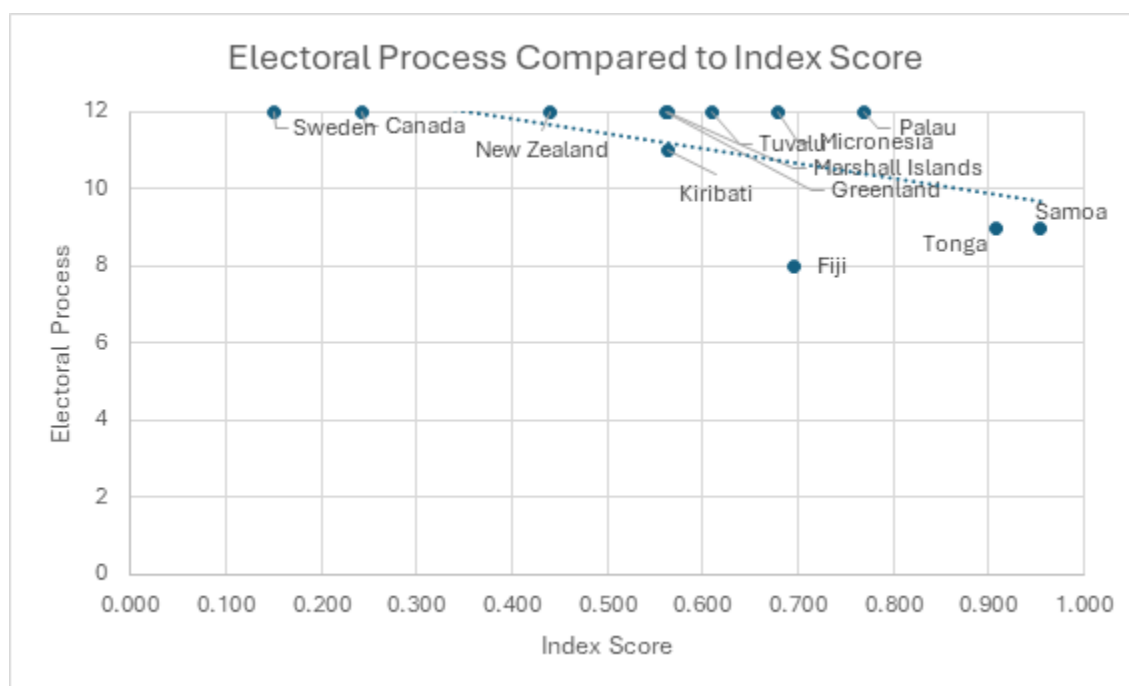
After discussing the results in the previous chapter, this chapter proceeds to analyze them within the context of the research question – that being to determine the relationship between the indigenization of governance and quality of democracy. As previously stated, these results were particularly surprising and seemed to support Lawson’s assertion that the two are inherently incompatible. That being said, this chapter argues that there are compelling reasons to remain skeptical about Lawson’s hypothesis. In addition to the methodological flaws in Lawson’s approach, as outlined in the preceding literature review, however, this chapter also delves deeper into the Freedom House data, raising serious questions about measurement, and accuracy. Even more concerning, this chapter argues, is the subtle but inescapable neo-colonial bias evident in both Lawson and Freedom House that dismisses indigenization of institutions as a deviation or aberration from the (colonial) norm that necessarily implies inferior democratic performance.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the results of both the OLS Regression, as well as the subsequent Pearson’s R correlation, were quite shocking and seemed to wholly support Lawson’s assertion that “traditional methods of governance” are inherently incompatible with western democratic systems.

Particularly interesting is the fact that the preceding findings point to a relationship between the indigenization of institutions and the quality of democracy that is likely even more strongly negative than even Lawson would have predicted. Before accepting these findings at face value, however, it is worth revisiting Lawson’s original argument in greater detail. As previously mentioned in the Literature Review chapter, a significant bulk of the existing literature uses a predominantly comparative methodology to examine democratic trends within the South Pacific.

Lawson's work is not unique in this aspect, as she specifically uses the cases of Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa to attempt to prove her assertion. However, as Figure 5.1 shows, these three cases have some of the lowest scores when it comes to quality of democracy, with Fiji being a notable outlier.

Figure 5.1: A scatterpoint graph showing the relationship between IIGI Score and Electoral Process – note the positioning of Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa.



This very well could indicate that Lawson's work is subject to cherry-picking, as she is drawing conclusions on the entirety of the South Pacific, based purely on three observations that appear to have been on the more "extreme" side of what she is predicting. Interestingly, her book does not include Palau, a nation that, according to the IIGI Score, has an even higher level of integration of traditional governing principles than Fiji does – yet still maintains a perfect or near-perfect score on most of the disaggregated Freedom House components. As Figure 5.1 shows, Lawson omits many cases that have similar IIGI Scores to Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga – but have significantly higher Freedom House scores. This is a clear sign of cherry picking, as there are many cases with similar levels of incorporation given towards indigenous governing

principles that Lawson fails to mention, that similarly lack the evident democratic faults that Lawson argues are present within a country that gives significant levels of power to its pre-colonial “Pacific Way” systems of governance. Palau and Micronesia in particular are states which, according to the IIGI Score, have near identical levels of consideration given to pre-colonial governance; but, according to Freedom House, possess qualities of democracy well above the predicted line of best fit.

By providing a more in-depth analysis, placing essentially all states within the South Pacific onto a spectrum using the IIGI, this study can essentially circumvent problems relating to cherry-picking. Lawson herself states that she has selected these cases as they are “cases where political power is seen as the god-given right of an exclusive group who occupy the apex of the 'natural order'” (Lawson 1996, 174), and while she may be using this extremely vague definition as a criticism of chiefly systems across the region, the IIGI demonstrates that this certainly does not apply equally across cases within the South Pacific.

Analyzing Freedom House’s Methodology

Although there certainly are problems with Lawson’s non-comprehensive case-study based methodology, it is also imperative to analyze problems with the Freedom House index. Freedom House, as aforementioned, is the only mainstream dataset which has data cataloguing quality of democracy across the South Pacific, as other datasets, such as V-Dem, lack any data whatsoever on the region. While this made Freedom House the de facto best option for this sort of project, it also poses serious problems in terms of being able to properly accept these results, if there happened to be glaring issues with the Freedom House data.

Table 5.1: The disaggregated score for Freedom House's Electoral Process variable for Samoa

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts	
Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	3/4
A2 0-4 pts	
Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	3/4
A3 0-4 pts	
Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	3/4

Table 5.1 shows the individual scoring components that go into Freedom House's *Electoral Process* variable (Freedom House 2025). As can be seen, Samoa has a score of three in each individual category, while Freedom House does not give any sort of topology on what this means, as in whether this is an above average score or not, in the grand scheme of all nations within the Freedom House Dataset, an overall score of 9/12 on Electoral Process is not particularly bad, as the global mean for the Electoral Process score is ~6/12. However, upon further examination, the scoring given to Samoa seems rather arbitrary, and very inconsistent. Within Samoa, which achieved universal suffrage in 1991, only those with Matai titles are allowed to run for office (So'o and Fraenkel 2005, 334). Matai titles being, essentially, traditional heads of families – and their spouses, in the traditional *Fa'amatai* system in Samoa.

While, as aforementioned, all Samoans have been eligible to vote regardless of gender and wealth since 1991, this is a major oversight in the freedom of elections. This would make Samoan elections procedurally fair, as there is little to no evidence of tampering or rigging of elections, it certainly does not make them free for all citizens – as only a very small subset of the population would be able to stand for election. A score of 3/4 is hardly accurate to give a country that restricts such a large majority of the population from running, particularly when Freedom House phrases the question as “Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?” (Freedom House 2025). Upon further examination of Freedom House’s methodology, there does not appear to be any specific criteria in which Samoa should be losing points for. According to Freedom House’s methodology on Electoral Process, the only examination given to who can run for election is based on whether women can run for office (Freedom House 2026). Freedom House then assumes that if women can run for office, which in the case of Samoa is true (at least for titled women), then everyone in the country can run for office. However, as the Samoan example proves, that simply is not the case as a country can allow women to run but still disallow the vast majority of their citizens from being able to run.

It is important to note that while in this case, Freedom House has given Samoa too high of a score, which in theory if coded correctly would only further prove Lawson’s assertion, an omission this large of something that is so quintessential to understanding the Samoan electoral system casts serious doubt on Freedom House’s familiarity with the Samoan example. If Freedom House misses something so intrinsic and notable to the Samoan system, how can they be trusted to give non-biased and accurate descriptions of other more nuanced aspects of Samoan politics? In short, their data on Samoa simply cannot be trusted, as the complete omission of the restriction on who can actually run for office is too gross of an omission to overlook. This

suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of Samoa, and that Freedom House is applying their coding scheme based on a very flawed understanding of the case.

Freedom House's data is not only skewed in Samoa, however, as there appears to be relatively sloppy coding on other cases within the South Pacific as well. In the I-Kiribati example, for instance, Freedom House seems to fundamentally misunderstand the I-Kiribati electoral system. In their 2025 report on Kiribati, they give the country a score of 3/4 on the question "was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?" Freedom House describes this change by stating that "The score declined from 4 to 3 because the newly elected parliament, in a departure from precedent, only nominated candidates affiliated with the ruling party to run for president, though one candidate ultimately defected to the opposition and unsuccessfully challenged incumbent President Taneti Maamau." (Freedom House 2025). There are two glaring issues with this reasoning, however. Firstly, if we are to take Freedom House's reasoning at face value, should an incumbent political party fundamentally excluding members of the opposition from running for president really only be a 1-point deduction, culminating in Kiribati still maintaining a near perfect score on electoral fairness?

Furthermore, Freedom House does not seem to properly understand how the I-Kiribati president, which is referred to as the *Beretitenti*, is elected in the first place. The Beretitenti is elected directly by members of parliament, in a similar fashion to how a Westminster-style Prime Minister is elected indirectly by members of the legislature rather than by a direct election by the electorate. Beretitenti elections are typically composed of three-to-four candidates, although in some cases there can be as few as two candidates for election, and the candidates are directly nominated by and from among members of the democratically elected House of Assembly. In

years prior there typically were at least two-members from the two dominant parties represented in the Beretitenti election. However, a key difference in the 2024 I-Kiribati Beretitenti election compared to all previous elections, was that in the 2024 *Parliamentary* elections, the incumbent Tobwaan Kiribati Party (TKP) party won by an absolute supermajority, winning 33 of the 44 total seats in the legislature, with the opposition Boutokaan Kiribati Moa (BKM) party only winning around 8 seats (IPU 2024). This was a drastic difference from the previous election in 2020, where the TKP and BKM parties tied at 22 seats each. Considering this wild change and overwhelming majority in the I-Kiribati parliament, it makes sense that all Beretitenti candidates would be from the winning TKP party, as the BKM party members likely would not have been able to secure enough votes to become officially nominated for the presidency. While Freedom House attempts to frame this as a democratically dubious “departure from precedent” (Freedom House 2025), it seems more likely that the I-Kiribati system is working as intended. While the I-Kiribati presidential electoral system may be unorthodox, its outcomes are directly caused by the results of the parliamentary elections – which are done freely and fairly.

A final point of concern relates to Freedom House’s general lack of justifications that it gives on its cases in the South Pacific, as well as a complete lack of explanations on most coding decisions in the region. Where a country like the United States can sometimes have up to six paragraphs explaining the reasoning behind a given component (Freedom House 2025), most countries in the South Pacific will not have a single paragraph explaining the reasoning behind their received score on a specific component. This is particularly problematic for countries like Tuvalu, where Freedom House has docked points for a lack of safeguards against corruption, as well as a lack of openness and transparency within the government. But, considering that Tuvalu is not listed in most mainstream datasets that measure corruption, such as the Corruption

Perceptions Index (Transparency 2024), and there is not a robust quantity of academic literature suggesting that transparency nor corruption are problems within Tuvalu – it is entirely unclear where Freedom House is gathering its data from, nor why it is arriving to this conclusion.

This lack of explanatory rigor is not unique to Freedom House's report on Tuvalu and can be observed within varying degrees amongst all nations within the South Pacific. Even within a more well-researched country like Fiji, which does appear on other mainstream datasets such as V-Dem, Freedom House's explanations on why Fiji has received its given scores is lacking at best. For example, Fiji received a score of 2/4 on the question "Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?" (Freedom House 2025), however Freedom House's overall report makes no mention of domestic violence, control over appearance, nor arranged marriage within Fiji. This lack of overall explanations on more niche cases within the dataset, combined with the aforementioned sloppy coding, causes serious problems with Freedom House's legitimacy, as it is entirely unclear where this information is coming from, nor whether or not it was arbitrarily decided based on external factors. In the Tuvaluan example, the lack of pre-existing literature on corruption within Tuvalu heavily points towards this being a completely arbitrary decision on Freedom House's behalf, and since there is no explanation given as to why Tuvalu has earned this score, there is no good reason to accept this data at face value.

Furthermore, one must also examine Freedom House's general evaluations given to its post-colonial states. As aforementioned, Freedom House evidently lacks a comprehensive understanding of many of the socio-cultural elements and political institutions of many states within the South Pacific. While we have already highlighted the methodological concerns and

holes within Freedom House's dataset, the ideological and theoretical faults must also be properly examined. While the previous miscoding of Samoa and Kiribati could merely be reflective of a broader misunderstanding or general lack of knowledge on these cases – which in of itself would be unacceptable for a mainstream dataset, there still exists a pattern of colonial supremacy that can be seen within Freedom House's evaluations. The most evident example of this is in the aforementioned I-Kiribati 2024 election of the Beretitenti. While the I-Kiribati electoral system is unorthodox, with particular regard to how its candidates are nominated, there is virtually no evidence that the nomination of solely TKP candidates was done out of malice or that it was a power grab by the TKP to maintain the presidency, as the lack of BKM candidates was entirely due to the BKM's failure to gain a sufficient amount of seats in the House of Assembly. Despite the system working how it is supposed to, Freedom House interpreted this as a fault on I-Kiribati democracy and adjusted its score accordingly. This is clear evidence towards Freedom House having a bias towards more traditional European-style western democratic institutions, as they have unfairly punished Kiribati for modifying or customizing aspects of western systems to better suit the country's unique character. Considering that Kiribati is comprised of ~32 different islands and atolls, each holding unique groups of people with their own cultures and histories, it would be irrational to suggest that the country should conform to a more mainstream Western electoral system, rather than attempting to innovate and produce a new system that works for them – especially when that very same system has not been subject to the same criticisms by Freedom House in previous elections. It can be seen that Freedom House possesses a very colonial mindset that treats western-style political institutions as superior, and treats institutions that originate from the Pacific, as the I-Kiribati example proves, as flawed,

inferior, or subject to corruption; when the same standards are not applied to European or North American systems.

Overall, while the overall results of this study could be seen as proving Lawson's assertion that traditional systems of governance are inherently incompatible with democratic systems in the South Pacific, the glaring issues with the Freedom House dataset, unfortunately, make these results inconclusive. Considering Freedom House's evident lack of familiarity with the Samoan and I-Kiribati cases as evidenced by the complete omission of the restrictions on those without Matai titles from running for office, as well as the complete misunderstanding of the election of the Beretitenti; combined with the evidence of arbitrary coding decisions and lack of justification and explanation behind their decisions – Freedom House simply cannot be trusted as a viable or reputable source on matters related to the South Pacific. While at first, they were seen as the only option given their inclusion of the wide variety of cases, further examination has revealed that their data simply cannot be trusted. While their wider variety of cases compared to datasets like V-Dem could be seen as an advantage, the lack of an ability to cross-reference their findings with other quantitative datasets inherently makes Freedom House entirely unusable for this report's purposes.

Conclusion

After analyzing the results of our Pearson's R testing and fundamentally determining that the Freedom House dataset is far too unreliable to properly test this study's initial hypothesis, this chapter will then recap what this report has since gone over. Then, this chapter will discuss the particular strengths and weaknesses of this study – emphasizes the IIGI as both a novel and extremely useful advancement in the study of indigenization of institutions, as well as emphasizing how the weaknesses in the Freedom House dataset served as a significant limitation on the scope of this study. This chapter will then discuss what the ramifications of this study are on the future of the field, and what would have to transpire in order to properly test our initial hypothesis. Finally, this chapter will discuss the importance of the IIGI and conclude by evaluating the worth and value of this study on the wider field of comparative politics.

Recap

This study began with an examination of *Nukufetau v. Metia*, a landmark Tuvaluan supreme court case that not only forced Tuvalu to fundamentally rethink its constitutional laws regarding its relationship with the Falekaupule, but also perfectly demonstrates that there is a very real clash in the contemporary politics of the South Pacific regarding the relationship between pre-colonial and post-colonial systems of governance and political institutions. While in some cases the two may work harmoniously, *Nukufetau v. Metia* demonstrates that they can absolutely have an adverse effect on one another.

Nukufetau v. Metia, and its aftermath, was quintessential in inspiring the question of what precisely the relationship between political institutions and quality of democracy is, and how does the intersection of pre-colonial and post-colonial systems of governance affect that relationship? After a close reading of several key texts by scholars who specialize in the politics

of the region, a concrete answer was not evident in answering this question. A review of the existing literature on the subject proved relatively fruitless, as the majority of the literature was significantly hindered by a lack of systematic coverage, sloppy definitions of key concepts that experts could not agree on, and an overall lack of methodological rigour – leading to a complete absence of any attempt to statistically analyze this intersection, and determine whether or not that the indigenization of political institutions has any sort of major effect on quality of democracy. While Dr. Stephanie Lawson's *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific* was identified as a key text in the subject, as it has sparked considerable debate amongst academics, it was determined that Lawson's assertion that pre-colonial systems of governance are incompatible with western democratic institutions was ultimately not falsifiable without some sort of new dataset to empirically test her assertion, and to correct the aforementioned issues of a lack of systematic coverage, sloppy definitions, and a lack of methodological rigour within the field.

Seeing the evident problems within the existing literature, this study then proposed the creation of a new index, the IIGI, to solve the aforementioned problems, and provide a new way to quantify the indigenization of political institutions to empirically test Lawson's assertion. After defining the seven variables of the IIGI, and explaining how they fit together and are used to calculate the IIGI's overall final score – which is a scale from 0-1, this study then decided upon using the disaggregated components of the Freedom House dataset as dependent variables to test Lawson's Assertion. This study had theorized that Lawson's assertion would be fundamentally disproven, and that there would be no statistically significant relationship between the IIGI and the Freedom House components. Freedom House was largely chosen to capture variables relating to quality of democracy, but most importantly it was chosen as it is the only mainstream dataset that has recorded data for the vast majority of countries in the region. Even

larger and more reputable datasets like V-Dem fail to include any sort of data whatsoever on countries within Polynesia.

After conducting an OLS Regression to test the relationship between indigenization of political institutions and quality of democracy, as well as a bivariate Pearson's R analysis, this study was met with extremely shocking results. Even after eliminating multicollinearity and accounting for heteroskedasticity, the data analysis continued to provide very surprising results, which seemed to prove Lawson's assertion correct – suggesting that there was a significantly strong negative relationship between the IIGI and quality of democracy. In one particularly strong case, the value of the relationship between the IIGI score (the IV) and Freedom House's Functioning of Government variable (the DV), which measured political transparency and safeguards against corruption, was -0.73 and was acceptable at a 99% level of confidence. This means that around 73% of the variation in the Functioning of Government variable was due to variation in the IIGI score, which is an extremely large level of correlation. However, although the results seemed to unanimously back Lawson's assertion, this study then discussed how the data not only revealed key faults in Lawson's original work but also revealed major flaws in the methodology and theoretical reasoning behind the Freedom House dataset.

While the initial results were particularly surprising, they helped to shine light on some key issues in Lawson's original methodology. While Lawson used a primarily case-study based approach to arrive at her assertion, using the cases of Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji, the data analysis showed that not only do those three cases have some of the highest scores on the IIGI, they also had significantly lower levels of quality of democracy compared to other cases that achieved virtually identical IIGI scores, such as Palau and Micronesia, which Lawson notably omitted from her initial study – suggesting the presence of cherry-picking within Lawson's work.

However, the most shocking and potentially impactful part of this study was that it revealed the Freedom House data. After an examination of Freedom House's, it was revealed that there are several gross miscodings or flagrant misunderstandings of how different political institutions work within the South Pacific. In the case of Kiribati, Freedom House appeared to have penalized Kiribati's Electoral Process score based on the opposition failing to gain enough seats in the legislature to be able to nominate a candidate for the Beretitenti. Inversely, in the Samoan case, Freedom House awarded Samoa a particularly high Electoral Process score, despite only those with Matai titles – that being the traditional heads of families, being eligible to run for office within Samoa. These were major red flags that suggested that Freedom House does not have adequate knowledge to be able to properly judge and evaluate countries within the South Pacific. Additionally, considering that Freedom House does not provide an in-depth justification for most of their coding decisions on states within the South Pacific, combined with the lack of any other dataset, such as V-Dem, to be able to cross-reference Freedom House's decisions, inherently made the Freedom House dataset a remarkably unreliable source of information, and subsequently rendered this study, which had used Freedom House's data as our primary source of measurement for quality of democracy, as unable to properly judge Lawson's hypothesis.

However, even though the results of the OLS Regression and Pairwise correlation should be scrutinized due to the lackluster data from Freedom House, this study did reveal glaring flaws in one of the most well-used and reputable sources on quality of democracy. Furthermore, it was also noted how Freedom House demonstrated a particularly colonial worldview, as particularly noted in the I-Kiribati example but was evident throughout the South Pacific, Freedom House repeatedly punishes states for modifying western electoral systems, and views them as flawed, inferior, or subject to corruption.

Strengths and Weaknesses

This study had several key strengths. First and foremost, the establishment of the IIGI as a method of quantifying and systematically covering the level of indigenization of political institutions that states across the world engage in. While this certainly could apply to all democratic states around the world, as demonstrated in the Results Chapter, the IIGI is particularly instrumental in patching holes in the political academic literature on the South Pacific, as aforementioned the pre-existing literature is significantly hindered by issues of a lack of systematic coverage, sloppy definitions of key concepts, and an overall lack methodological rigour. These are three elements that the IIGI significantly helps to ameliorate, as it not only provides a way to systematically test assertions such as Lawsons which, prior to now, were unable to be empirically tested, but it also provides a universal framework for comparing indigenization of political institutions regardless of sloppy definitions, as well as providing a way to statistically test and quantify data from a region which is significantly lacking on quantifiable statistical research.

Another key strength of this study was the revelations it brought forward on the Freedom House dataset. Despite Freedom House being one of the largest and more reputable datasets in the world – and the only mainstream dataset with data on most countries in the South Pacific, this study revealed that Freedom House lacks knowledge on some of the most basic socio-cultural and political institutions across the South Pacific. Freedom House’s 2025 report on Samoa fundamentally misunderstands basic Samoan electoral law and does not give nearly enough credence to the overwhelming number of Samoans who are fundamentally barred from running for office within their country. Similarly, this report also shined light on Freedom House’s colonial assumptions and biases towards western political institutions. As the I-Kiribati

example proves that Freedom House punishes countries in the Global South when they deviate from their inherited post-colonial democratic institutions, and perceives them as flawed, inferior, and subject to corruption – as opposed to seeing them as necessary innovations to synthesize pre-colonial understandings of governance with modern democratic institutions.

This study has some key weaknesses as well, however. Perhaps the most notable weakness is the sheer number of limitations that prevented this study from achieving what it had initially set out to accomplish. This study was unable to fundamentally prove or disprove Lawson's assertion as there simply does not exist a dataset capable of providing the information that would be needed to do so. Additionally, while the IIGI was useful in ameliorating the aforementioned faults in the pre-existing literature, the lack of systematic coverage of these cases, as well as the sloppy definitions and lack of substantive ethnological literature on how many pre-colonial systems of governance function in the South Pacific, or on how people within the South Pacific interact with their national and local levels of governance, significantly hindered this study's ability to be as thorough as possible in comparing these political institutions.

Another weakness within this study is the small size of the dataset. Largely due to resource and time-constraints, only 16 cases were able to be coded within the initial IIGI dataset – with that then having to be trimmed down to 12 due to Freedom House lacking data on four of the original cases. This raises some questions about the reliability of the results of the OLS Regression. However, considering that there are only 16 independent states within the South Pacific, it is difficult to not have issues of sample size bias when studying the region.

Future Research

While this study was unable to successfully challenge Lawson's assertion, largely due to the lack of reliable data on quality of democracy within the South Pacific, the establishment of the IIGI certainly opens the door for future research on the topic. However, before Lawson's assertion can successfully be empirically analyzed, a reputable and reliable dataset on quality of democracy that includes data on the South Pacific must be constructed. This would require either Freedom House to rethink their approach on categorizing these states, thus requiring them to develop a greater understanding of how political institutions across the South Pacific work, or it would require another dataset like V-Dem to begin to analyze and incorporate states from across the South Pacific into their dataset. Additionally, this hypothetical future dataset, whether that be from Freedom House or from V-Dem, would quintessentially have to rethink and challenge their colonial assumptions on political institutions, and cast aside their biases towards western political institutions.

Conclusion

Overall, while this study was unable to successfully challenge Lawson's assertion, and ultimately was unable to accept the results of the OLS Regression, the establishment of the IIGI and the challenging of Freedom House's methodology remain as massive advancements in the study of political science – particularly in regard to the study of political institutions in the South Pacific. The IIGI significantly ameliorates the pre-existing faults in the academic literature, by introducing a universal framework for systematically covering these cases, as well as providing a way to analyze and compare pre-colonial and indigenous systems of governance regardless of the sloppy definitions given in the pre-existing literature, and it allows for a sense of unified methodological rigour in the study of indigenization of political institutions. Additionally, by analyzing Freedom House's methodology and revealing its flaws, this study has essentially

opened the door for a new dataset to come forward and properly quantify these cases so that future research on the relationship between the indigenization of political institutions and quality of democracy can be properly examined. While the OLS Regression results are certainly subject to scrutiny, due to the unreliability of the Freedom House data, this study has still brought forward significant advancements within the field and shined new light on an ongoing debate on quality of democracy and self-determination.

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