

Why Filipinos vote the way they do

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While a good number of thoughtful Filipinos believe that the May 2022 presidential election is a watershed moment for our country and for generations to come — one that demands the most careful reflection about the kind of nation we want to be — this is not necessarily how the majority of voters think about this election, or other elections for that matter.

All elections are relational in nature — meaning, their importance depends on how a voter regards his/her vote in relation to the practicalities of their daily lives. Some voters simply don't care enough to take the trouble of registering and going to the polls. Others strictly follow the "guidance" of their religious leaders as a matter of duty. For the vast majority, especially at the local level where politics is much more intense, elections are mainly a time for choosing which patronage network they identify with.

This manifest identification is arguably of greater value to them than the cash they may receive on voting day. Seen in this context, money may be offered, and accepted, not as a bribe, but as a token of a more enduring relationship. This depiction, which indeed may be buttressed by rationalizations of all kinds, is easier on the conscience.

The patronage networks I'm talking about here are local support systems kept alive all year round by barangay and "pook" leaders, municipal and city councilors, mayors, and district representatives. They are held together at the top by dominant political families and business blocs, and the whole array of private enterprises (both legal and illegal) and public agencies they control.

In provinces like Pampanga, where gambling operations of long standing have fused seamlessly with political coalitions, it is not easy to tell the difference between public service and private charity. In both systems, access is determined by patronage relations.

The dominant alliance of former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and the Pineda family (that has controlled the governor's office since 2010) is a case in point. GMA connects the Pinedas to the levers of power in the national government, and, in return, the Pinedas maintain the patronage network that sustains the political fortunes of the former president and her family in the home province.

We are not just talking of the proceeds from small-time "jueteng" or its legal incarnation, the small town lottery or STL. The same operators have long branched out to the more highly profitable virtual "sabong" (cockfights), which rakes in billions in daily bets, while sharing a portion of the earnings with the government. For all the pernicious effects this new form of gambling has had on the lives of bettors in the poorest communities, President Duterte has refused to ban it because of the revenue it generates.

Above the level of the local community — say, at the senatorial and presidential levels — the search for affinity typically follows linguistic lines. Filipino voters still prefer to vote for their kind. Despite all claims to modernity, we remain basically tribal. Which is why the old political formula of

recruiting presidential tandems from the major regional linguistic groups remains relevant.

It is in the major urbanized cities, where ethnic identities converge and dissolve, that we may find the ideal independent voter who bases his/her choices on a careful scrutiny of candidates' qualifications, personal integrity, relevant experience, past performance, and political platform. Still, even in such settings, the quest for connection or affinity never completely disappears.

I know of some educated voters who cannot imagine not supporting the candidacies of people they personally know and relate to, even when these candidates openly endorse presidential bets who represent everything they oppose. This willful blindness to issues and to visions of a better society is what makes our politics so hopelessly myopic and personal.

But that is just my view as a political observer. In many ways, every voter is also an observer who justifies the choices he or she makes according to criteria that he/she may or may not be fully aware of. Whatever they are, such criteria never appear in surveys. I have always wondered, for instance, what type of logic governs the senatorial rankings reported in this year's pre-election surveys. My guess is that these preferences are more likely based on the emotional disposition of survey respondents than on any rigorous calculation of the kind of Senate our country needs at this time.

The same applies to the results of pre-election surveys for the presidency. Are we to take these results—for example, the more than 50 percent share registered by candidate Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in all the surveys these past few months—as proof that the Filipino people have forgotten and forgiven all the atrocities, abuse of power, and corruption that led to the ouster of the Marcos dictatorial regime in 1986? I don't think so.

As the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu succinctly puts it, "nothing more inadequately expresses the state of opinion than a percentage." This is even more so when randomly chosen individuals are asked whom they would vote for if elections were held then and there. How much thought do they give to their answers within the time allotted to them?

The point is: elections are less about public opinion than they are about hidden feelings and latent dispositions that cannot easily be formulated in a coherent way — or countered by appeal to facts.

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P.S.

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