

# The Veracity of Vote Buying: Perspective of the Philippine Electoral System

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## ABSTRACT

Vote buying during election is a phenomenon in Philippine politics clandestinely practiced as underground activities by political candidates who utilize it as a political strategy. This study examined the vote buying phenomenon of the Philippines during periodic elections in the national and local levels. It utilized secondary data from various source agencies and published refereed journals on practices of fraud and vote buying which have crucially shape out election results and the electoral system of the country. The findings suggest that Filipino traditional voters attribute vote buying to “patron-client relations” during elections where parity and justice are momentarily accomplished when political candidates carry out their obligations and lend supports to their constituents with vested interests. Operationally for many Filipino voters, vote buying is a tangible “gift” from aspiring candidates which influences their choice and produce instrumental compliance. This phenomenon underlying the patron-client ties manifests a two-fold bond of reciprocity and mutual obligation linking individuals of disproportionate social status and authority based on the exchange of money and votes. Those less educated and rural residents are among the more vulnerable electoral groups to vote buying. The study concludes that vote buying as practiced in the Philippines has penetrated all levels of the bureaucracy. The veracity of vote buying has become culturally intricate with fraud, intimidation and violent means to win the electoral race.

**Keywords** - Vote buying, electoral system, political culture, voters' education, election exercise, rural residents, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

The electoral system is considered as the set of rules which govern the conduct of elections in a democratic form of government like the Philippines. It recognizes the counting of votes which signals election outcomes whereby any candidate vying for public office is directly elected to a particular position based on what he/she runs for. The entire election exercise is viewed as an instrument for evaluating and changing governments at all levels of the bureaucracy. It is also regarded as a legal opportunity for those in power and those who are not to influence each other. The electorates are the very heart of this political process where in the Philippine political context, every legal age Filipino has the right to vote and elect government officials.

It is during the height of the election campaign where vote buying casts dark shadows towards realizing clean election outcomes. When election exercise is approaching, candidates through "vote brokers" usually tender cash offerings or material gifts to electorates who are registered voters within their jurisdiction. Vote buying in the Philippines is considered illegal but continually proliferates as underground activities where political candidates engaged themselves. Article 22 of the Omnibus Election Code (OEC) of the Philippines articulates vote buying as "giving, offering, or promising money, favors, or jobs in exchange for getting a person's vote for the candidate or causing the person to vote against somebody else." The OEC makes both the seller and buyer of the votes criminally liable.

Vote buying continues to be a widespread practice during election period, more predominantly during election day, when voters are about to go to polling centers to cast their votes. This practice is known to all voters that, in principle, it has become more tolerated or accepted than viewed as illegal practice punishable by law. Over the history of the country's electoral exercise, the Commission on Election (COMELEC) has reported many vote buying cases during the 2013 local elections which resulted to disqualifications of candidates, others being put behind bars. However, the practice itself has continued to proliferate at all levels of the bureaucracy being done clandestinely which has been labeled as a "political disease" (Callahan, 2005) deeply entrenched within the electoral system of Philippine society.

Voters know that it is happening near and around polling centers through delegated vote brokers or trusted persons of the candidates; however, it is very

difficult to prove this illegal practice since it is clandestinely done. In more than four decades of Philippine election history, it has become an accepted unlawful practice among political candidates and known to every voting individual.

In this paper, the author critically examined the issue of vote buying in the Philippines during periodic elections in the national and local levels. The paper also reviewed and analyzed the veracity of vote buying phenomenon in shaping the electoral system of the country from the point of view of the political candidates and voters.

## FRAMEWORK

This study anchored its theoretical framework on the Public Choice Theory of Buchanan and Tullock (as cited in Shaw, 2002). The theory stresses that people are primarily motivated by self-interests. The theorists assumed that people, though show concerns for others, are mainly motivated by self-interests, may they be politicians, lobbyists, voters or bureaucrats participating in the political arena (Shaw 2002).

Presented in this paper are related literature whose findings revolve around the vote buying phenomenon and scenarios occurring during election campaigns and during voting exercise. Gersbach and Muhe (2011) noted that vote buying tactic has been widely used in developing countries to shape election outcomes.

Meanwhile, Ibana (as cited in Schaffer, 2005a), reported that the transaction of vote buying and selling encompasses the economic gains attained by those who let themselves be influenced of the offered cash money or goods in exchange of their votes. Vote buying also transcends the economic and monetary costs incurred by election candidates who look forward to regain their investment once elected into office and get into power (Ibana, as cited in Schaffer, 2005a). For the common people, elections are periods where more financially capable candidates endeavor to extend assistance to their constituents through financial supports or private goods provision with the end view of gaining votes and get elected (Shaffer, 2005a). In essence, this is the period where patron-client rapport reaches equality and justice as persons of unequal social status mutually fulfill their obligations through exchange of votes and money.

In like manner, Schopf (2011) acknowledged that politicians need to reward their supporters to keep their power wherein this reward tactic has to cover the majority of their voting constituents. This is accomplished through the allocation of private goods or buying votes as effective means to secure support during

election exercise (Schopf, 2011). Gersbach and Muhe (2011) also found that vote buying “contributes to the persistence of poverty as taxed wealthy people buy votes from poor people.”

Vilalta (2010) reported that many countries of the globe practice vote buying which is seen as a conventional strategy for garnering votes during elections and it starts as soon as there are electoral campaigns. He noted that countries which practice vote buying include Egypt, Cambodia, Philippines, Thailand, Russia, Serbia, Brazil, Argentine, Venezuela and Mexico. Aside from this, literature revealed that vote buying is also practiced in Taiwan (Wu and Huang, 2004) and among the African countries with nature and characteristics akin to some countries yet distinct in some perspectives (Constantine, 2009).

Wu and Huang (2004) noted that vote buying by candidates has long been practiced in Taiwan during elections and such issue of malpractice deeply concerns the Taiwanese people. There are two common scenarios to describe the phenomenon; (1) Election knows no master which can be bought with monetary payment and (2) even if one spends money, there is no guarantee of winning in the election, but if one does not buy votes, he/she is assured to lose (Wu and Huang, 2004).

Afrobarometer (as cited in Constantine, 2009) revealed that a non-partisan survey was conducted among 18 African countries of which the finding indicated 75 percent of the respondents confirming vote buying practice among political candidates. This is done by politicians during election campaigns by offering “gifts” to the electorates just to win in the election. On the downside, when election is over and vote buying candidates get elected into office, Africans usually get disappointed when their elected officials and representatives never fulfill their promises and do not anymore listen to their constituents (Constantine, 2009).

The vote buying practice has also shaped the political milieu of Thailand (Callahan, 2005) where it has become one of the campaign tactics and a power retention strategy during elections. In the context of Thai political culture, Callahan (2005) stressed that vote buying is a result of unique associations of powers between polity and economy, urban and rural areas, official and unofficial transactions. He stressed that to fight against vote buying practice, “one needs to challenge the dynamics of these relationships.”

Hicken, Leider, Ranavilla and Yang (2014) reported the case of vote buying occurrences in Sorsogon, Philippines. They studied the voting behaviors during the 2013 city mayor, vice-mayor and city council elections where they confirmed about widespread vote buying practices in the locality during the week prior

to election day. Hicken et al. (2014) noted that vote brokers secured voter lists and directly approached each household to tender money or goods in exchange for votes on certain candidate and his/her affiliated political party. It was also confirmed that such vote buying practices did not only happen in the city areas but were more evident in the rural villages of Sorsogon periphery (Hicken et al., 2014).

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The study determined the veracity of vote buying using the perspective of the Philippine electoral system.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study used descriptive design involving secondary data from various source agencies and published refereed journals on practices of fraud and vote buying which have crucially shape out election results and the electoral system of the country. Qualitative data gathered from online refereed journals served as sources for the discussions of results.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings indicate that Filipino traditional voters attribute vote buying to “patron-client relations” which is temporarily established during election period and achieve equality and justice when aspiring candidates fulfill their duties and obligations to their constituents. Apparently, many Filipino voters regard vote buying as a particular offer from election candidates which can influence their vote and produce instrumental compliance. Another noticeable vote buying form in the Philippines is the one-time transaction between the election candidate (directly or through the vote brokers) and the voter. This practice is more evident for new entrants into the political race. Such form of vote buying has been confirmed by Nichter (2013) who argued that it is fundamentally different from the patron-client relation which puts emphasis on the “longstanding relationships” between the candidate and the electorate.

At the onset, the phenomenon underlying patron-client ties manifests a two-fold bond of reciprocity and mutual obligation linking individuals of disproportionate social status and authority based on the exchange of money and

votes. This patron-client phenomenon particularly holds true for those voters in the rural areas who have not completed elementary education. Cruz (2014), reported the prevalence of vote buying in many Philippine rural areas. She noted that journalists, who were closely working and coordinating with the COMELEC during the 2007 elections, have observed cash money offerings ranging from 50-1,500 pesos (roughly about US\$1.11-US\$33.42) in the rural localities they were assigned to monitor. This clearly manifests the perpetuation of vote buying practices on electorates in the rural areas.

Indicatively, the level of education plays a crucial role on the issue surrounding vote buying. Voters who are less educated, for instance did not complete elementary schooling, are more likely to bend for vote buying influencing their choices rather than electing based on the merits and credibility of candidates. This implies the need for voters' education at an early school age since the less educated electorate and those in poverty are more vulnerable to the vote buying tactics of election candidates. In fact, Schaffer (2005b) noted that vote buying as practiced in the Philippines manifests the sensitivity of politicians to the more vulnerable voters who are poor and the less educated. He argued that such sensitivity may not be manipulative, instead a response to the needs of the poor and less educated voters whereby candidates take actions with multiple approaches like giving gifts during election time and any kind of assistance on other occasions.

From the Philippine political cultural context, election is viewed to be the primary mechanism in determining who has political control over the government in the national and local levels. The most crucial issue is how to get elected, then every benefit will be at reach by those getting the positions. In this regard, evidences presented and gathered from many published literature (Kerkvliet, 2002; Schaffer, 2005a; Sidel, 1997; Linantud, 2005, Ruland, 2003; Thomson, 2010) suggest strong patron-client relationships where candidates heavily relied on vote buying, fraud, intimidation and even resorting to violence just to win elections. The findings also confirm the argument of the Public Choice Theory (Buchanan and Tullock, as cited in Shaw, 2002) where politicians are more motivated for self-interests instead of social responsibilities attached to their positions in the public service.

Apparently, vote buying practices continued to proliferate in the Philippines. There are several factors which contribute to the continuous existence of vote buying. For one scenario, when voters refuse to receive the offered money and report the vote buying attempt, it becomes very difficult to prove since no evidence can be presented concretely thus the vote buying allegation cannot be substantiated. In the end, the offender (vote buyer) can easily deny the charge

and the filed allegation can be dismissed easily for lack of established proof. This is one of the reasons where vote buying become rampant during election period and is often executed with impunity. The study of Finan and Schechter (2012) affirms this finding when they argued that vote buying is never-ending due to individual's feeling of reciprocity. They expounded that voters derive contentment in seeing their material payoffs increased from the help-offering politicians in exchange of their votes. Moreover, the candidates vote brokers also choose those voters who are most likely to reciprocate the monetary offers in exchange of their votes.

Vote buying, practiced either through giving selected benefits using cash money and/or other instruments, has penetrated all levels of the country's bureaucracy and has stained the countries electoral system. Moreover, vote buying practice has become like a social cancer which is very difficult to eradicate even if recognized as a negative societal norm which needs concrete electoral reform. Arguably, a concrete and effective reform is not easy to come by as the electoral system in the Philippines demands upside down overhaul of the country's political culture, more tangibly along the intricacies of multifaceted bureaucracy and political processes. Nevertheless, as a development outlook, such reform should start somewhere, somehow.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the foregoing discussions, the study concludes that the veracity of vote buying, as practiced in the Philippines, has penetrated all levels of the bureaucracy and has deeply entrenched into the country's electoral system. Education and rural dwellings bear witness to the vulnerability of the electorates where vote buying practices largely perpetuate among rural residents and less educated electorates. The veracity of vote buying has become culturally intricate with fraud, intimidations and even violent means to win the electoral race. More often than not, election practices in the Philippines manifest a failure of a key political exercise of freedom in electing political leaders who are supposed to bring about good governance and public administration. Lastly, the study confirmed the argument put forward by the advocates of Public Choice Theory wherein political candidates are mainly driven by self-interests in rendering selective supports to their constituents with core motives of getting the electorates cast votes in their favor.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that authentic, effective and efficient implementation of the electoral process has to be enforced at all levels of the bureaucracy. Ultimately, voters education need to be undertaken since early school age levels so that starting early in life, children would know that vote buying is not, and should never be the norm in deciding whom to choose during elections.

Related studies may be explored focusing on other perspectives of vote buying supportive to full understanding of its phenomenon and mechanism thereby help policymakers in designing more effective measures to put an end to this illegal election-driven practice. Another study may also be pursued to explore if vote buying has implications to the economic development at the local and national governments.

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