



PROGRAM ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE

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Making Voter Education a Pillar of Democracy in the Philippines

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Why do voter education?

The importance of voter education in producing a mature and informed electorate cannot be overstated. Educating the voters is just as critical to the effective functioning of a democratic system as the electoral process itself. Providing vital information to voters allows the electorate to make sound and enlightened choices. Voter education is a necessity that cannot be ignored. Neglecting voter education can undermine the integrity and credibility of any electoral process and pose a serious challenge to democratic institutions. Indeed, voter education allows citizens to have a healthy respect for the democratic process regardless of the outcome.

What is voter education? Voter education means providing citizens with the relevant information about elections. This includes information on the mechanics of the electoral process, who can participate, and how qualified citizens can exercise their right to vote. Voter education provides information about elective positions that need to be filled up in the different levels and branches of government (e.g., local and national, as well as executive and legislative bodies), including the responsibilities, duties, and powers

of said officials. More importantly, voter education programs disseminate the requisite information on the candidates and what they stand for. While elections provide the opportunity for voters to hold officeholders accountable, voter education can equip voters to make the right decisions to make these officials accountable for their actions as well as the policies they adopt while in office.

This policy brief outlines some of the advantages and challenges associated with voter education initiatives. Firstly, it underscores the benefits of having a sustained and effective voter education program that can give rise to an informed and intelligent electorate. Secondly, it provides an overview description of selected voter education initiatives in the Philippines. Lastly, citing a few best practices in other countries, it discusses some steps that can be taken towards institutionalizing an effective voter education campaign.

The Benefits of Voter Education

Voter education offers a psychological and political advantage to the electorate. With the information they provide, effective voter education programs can raise the confidence

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of voters to allow them to face the intricacies of the formal electoral process that would otherwise be intimidating and discouraging.

Voter education acts as a conceptual bridge linking the positions of voters with those of the candidates. It can improve voters' "ability to identify candidates who share their policy views" (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2018, 1003). An experimental survey done by Boudreau et al. (2018) found that voter education tools describing the policy views of candidates help voters identify and strengthen their relationship with the candidates and their respective policy views. They also discovered that uninformed voters benefit more from this type of intervention than high-knowledge voters.

Voter education can lead to a reduction in election malpractices such as vote-buying. In the Philippines, vote buying (or vote selling) can take many forms, but they normally happen among the poor (see Canare et al. 2018). Schaffer (2005) cites a survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) indicating that around seven percent of voting-age adults (equivalent to three million voters) nationwide were said to have been offered some form of payment for their votes during the 2002 barangay elections. A study by Harry and Ogbu (2022, 29) in Lagos, Nigeria, found that "voter education plays a key role in reducing incidents of electoral malpractices . . . [and] found strong evidence of [curbing] vote-selling to a large extent." Voter education programs can reduce instances of illicit electoral disenfranchisement due to disinformation or lack of knowledge and awareness of election procedures and voter rights on the part of qualified members of the public.

As a tool for civic education, voter education can curb political disenchantment among the members of the electorate. This sentiment resonates particularly among the youth, who have been heavily exposed to the cancel culture that permeates social media. Voter education has the potential to reduce political polarization since voters become more aware of the differences and

similarities that exist across candidate platforms. This makes voter education more meaningful and relevant to (and avoiding alienation from) the larger voter population.

Voter Education Initiatives in the Philippines

The significance of voter education has been very much appreciated by both government and nongovernment institutions. While the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) has exclusive jurisdiction over the enforcement and administration of all election laws, it is also mandated to provide and disseminate information to the general public that is pertinent to the conduct of "clean, free, orderly, and honest electoral processes." More specifically, according to Article VII, Section 52(j) of the Omnibus Election Code, COMELEC shall

Carry out a continuing and systematic campaign through newspapers of general circulation, radio and other media forms to educate the public and fully inform the electorate about election laws, procedures, decisions, and other matters relative to the work and duties of the Commission and the necessity of clean, free, orderly and honest electoral processes. (Official Gazette 1985)

Given its primary function as election administrator, the voter education mandate of COMELEC has been largely confined to sponsoring the usual debates (primarily among candidates for national positions), as well as to disseminating information encouraging people to (1) register to vote (Magparehistro Ka!), (2) participate in the elections (Go Out and Vote!), and (3) become familiar with the vote-counting machines used in the elections.

It's no wonder then that voter education appears to be low in the priorities of election administrators in the Philippines. For instance, out of the total budget appropriation for COMELEC in 2022 amounting to PhP 26.7 billion, only around PhP 16.8 million was allocated to voter

education. This represents 0.06 percent of the election agency's total budget for that year, according to Section XXXIII of the General Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2022 (Official Gazette 2022).

In order to assist its work in managing elections, COMELEC is also mandated to enlist the help of nonpartisan groups to ensure the conduct of free, orderly, and honest elections. The Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) was accredited by COMELEC as its citizens' arm during the May 2022 elections. PPCRV has also been accredited as one of two (the other is the National Citizens Movement for Free Elections or NAMFREL) citizens' arms for all elections until prior to the May 2025 polls (Aquino 2022). PPCRV was established in 1991 as a national parish-based movement for "Clean, Honest, Accurate, Meaningful, and Peaceful elections" (PPCRV 2021). Since then, thousands of its volunteers have engaged and utilized its extensive network of parishes in providing meaningful and useful information to voters during national and local elections.

In 2022, PPCRV created its e-Boto² hub portal to disseminate useful basic information on the mechanics of registration and voting. It also provides various types of valuable information pertaining to national candidates and politicians ranging from their platforms and promises to their actual performance in office. It also acts as a platform for its fact-checking and anti-disinformation campaign. More importantly, the portal acts as a vehicle for voters themselves to provide inputs on the performance and positions of their elected officials.

In 2003, the Institute for Political and Electoral Reform (IPER) came out with a training manual for its module on voter education.³ This manual is divided into several parts specific to voting rights; elections and democracy; the structure of

government; electoral procedures; voter behavior; and "a vision of ideal government" directed at encouraging voters to make informed choices. IPER is a nongovernment organization established in 1991 working towards strengthening Philippine democracy by advocating electoral reforms.

Meanwhile, the Legal Network for Truthful Elections (LENTE) has also undertaken its own voter education activities geared towards the legal aspects of elections. These activities include sessions on the rights of voters and other pertinent election laws and procedures such as the Fair Election Act, the Mandatory Biometric Law, and the Voter Registration Act, among others (see LENTE 2020). Established in 2007, LENTE is a "network of lawyers, law students, paralegals, and grassroots volunteers engaged" in election monitoring, electoral reform advocacy, and voter education.

Legislators have called for voter education campaigns to be undertaken, especially at the local levels (see Senate 2008; Senate 2009). Indeed, there have been initiatives in Congress to pass legislation on incorporating voter education in the basic education curriculum. In 2012, a voters' education bill was proposed; it sought to institute a voter education subject in the high school curriculum in both public and private schools. The proposed voter education subject would include lessons on the right of suffrage, the sanctity of the ballot, factors for choosing candidates, and the electoral process, among many others (Camero 2012). This was once again pushed in 2016 by the same legislator, Rep. Eric Olivarez of Parañaque City (Palomar 2016).

The drive to institutionalize voter education in the education system is also not lost on the executive leadership. In early March 2023, President Marcos Jr. backed the integration of voter education into the K-12 basic curriculum to educate students

² The site may be accessed at <https://eboto.ph>.

³ This manual may be accessed at <https://www.ombudsman.gov.ph/UNDP4/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/1-manual.pdf>

on the electoral system as well as to curb election malpractices (Flores et al. 2023).

Some Ways Forward

Effective voter education campaigns need to start long before an election and must continue throughout the electoral process. Moreover, voter education campaigns must avoid the “roadshow” approach since this can dilute their effectiveness and impact. Roadshows (see Senate 2009) only highlight the “special” character of voter education which can run counter to the idea that it should be a regular, ongoing program.

One observation of voter education programs in Asia (including the Philippines) is that they only focus on “electoral techniques instead of the substantive electoral section” (Amri et al. 2019, 464). One way of expanding the scope of voter education programs beyond simply knowing how, when, and where to vote, is to further encourage civil society groups to offer them. Civil society partnerships should be fostered toward providing meaningful and relevant voter education to the public. Ensuring civil society’s participation in voter education programs is effective in reaching out to young voters and encouraging them to be more participative in electoral processes (see, for instance, Mfundisi 2005 in the case of Botswana, and Suryanef and Rafni 2020 in Indonesia).

Much can be certainly gained by integrating voter education into the formal school curriculum, especially in history and sociology courses (Amri et al. 2019, 470). Civic education can be enhanced by incorporating elements of voter education values in the curriculum. However, of particular concern is the issue of neutrality of education providers and teachers. For instance, the “need for political neutrality” is seen as “an absolute imperative” for voter education programs in India (Quraishi 2020, 70). While the use of social media networks can make voter education programs more effective, such new media

platforms can also become vehicles for misinformation and fake news that can undermine the free and informed choices of voters.

Another challenge is for voter education programs not to sound judgmental and self-righteous. Coming from a middle-class perspective, they also must not be condescendingly directed at the poor who are less likely to resist the temptation to sell their votes. Recipients of this type of voter education can either miss the point entirely or may even encourage them to sell their votes by giving them the idea that it’s possible to do so. Schaffer (2005, 5) notes that programs that lecturing voters on the ills of selling one’s votes can come off as humiliating, insulting, and can even be taken the wrong way by people. A farmer is said to have remarked, “This ad says not to accept pocket change, so it means: go for the highest bidder!”

Finally, a thorough and independent mapping and review of the various voter education programs and initiatives in the Philippines is needed toward making them more effective and sustainable. This mapping should be accompanied by a review of the impact of such education programs on the electorate in order to learn from the best practices.

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