

*Consolidating People's Voices for Participation in National Elections:
Bridging Gaps Through ICT Initiatives*

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Abstract

The study looks at populism as an issue and how it impacts the democratic system of government in the Philippines. It examines how populist organizations and figures appeal to the populace by denouncing the governing class and offering fixes to various sociopolitical problems. It also looks at how the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), which oversees national elections, interacts with and influences citizens. The study proposes a participatory model of consultation and ICT survey at various barangay levels to bridge the gap between public desires and national governance. It aims to establish a platform for assembling public opinions and approving them for political candidates and governing organizations. It also intends to strengthen voter education, lessen vote-buying and corruption, and offer people more power to demand development as their right. The structure and analysis of the study are based on participatory development theory. Additionally, it provides evidence for its statements from reviews, author letters to others, journals, and interviews. The paper concludes with a number of recommendations for further research and action on this topic.

Keywords: Populism, Gap, Elections, E-governance

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Introduction

“Aanhin ba naming ‘yang GDP na ‘yan? Nakakin ba ‘yan?’”

(“What is GDP? Is that useful? Can people eat that?”—Translation in English)

The increasing demand and opinion of the masses has caught the attention of Philippine politics and seemingly emerges as a fundamental criterion of democracy recently. Contesting issues of oligarchy and elitism have been an issue coming from the popular opinion of the masses that wishes to eradicate a seemingly existing political approach in the aid of addressing the people’s common needs. It is evident for the last 5 years where a lot of populist leaders and leadership type are on the rise. For instance, the issue of Brexit as based from its referendum in 2016 becomes the reason for the emergence of a populist wave. This is also seen in some parts of Europe like Scandinavia where its parties, emerging as populists, continue to dominate. The United States even was held to be a captivated by such ideology as manifested by the recent 2016 Presidential elections where Donald Trump propagated a platform and agenda that resonates a kind of populism attitude. In Asia, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi awakened the inclination of the people to venture into populist appeals regardless of what kind of human rights measures is at stake (The Editors, 2019). The Philippines is not an exemption to such issue. Even in the country’s context, this has been labeled as a major disconnection to national and local democratic governance. The above adage is a manifestation of the current political leadership preference that has something to do on leaning towards people-driven leadership-setting aside the likes of important economic and political agenda and gives more attention to the aspects social security, peace and order to name a few. In view of the foregoing, how then does the concept of populism - captivating the masses – to become a preferred political approach?

Populism, as generally defined, refers to a set of political views that anchors itself to the idea that is “for the people” whether it’s general welfare or political advantage that usually places itself against any concept of manifestation of “elitism.” This involves populist parties and social movements that are often led by charismatic leaders or dominant figures who are so much leaning to the idea and identifies themselves as the solution to various socio-political problems and label themselves as the "voice of the people" (Michael, n.d.).

Populism in the Philippines

The contextualized account of populism in the country is based on the catering of political claims that give way to people’s demands and it is grounded to the analysis of cultural, discursive, and political conditions that makes the power of populist leaders to become legitimate (Webb & Curato, 2018). As an example, Duterte fits the category of a distinctive Asian strongman for the many. He is a tough talking leader with little regard for liberal rights. He disregards foreign interventions and considers criticisms against his regime as a personal attack. Despite widespread condemnation of various global governance institutions and international organizations located overseas, Duterte remains popular in the country. Based on the Pulse Asia Survey of 2018, he registered more than 80% popularity rating in the nearly two years into his presidency. In addition, he also had a 91% trust rating in the year 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic based from the Pulse Asia Survey of 2020.

The politics after EDSA Revolution in 1986 paved the way for the restoration of a democracy that has been dominated by the elite where the oligarchs have “considerable autonomy” to “manipulate formal democratic procedures” to their favor (Kerkvliet, 1995). Benedict

Anderson (1988) described Philippine politics as a “cacique democracy” – the marriage of American electoralism with its own concept of democracy with a Spanish concept of bossism (Tadem & Tadem, 2016; Mendoza, 2012; Simbulan, 2005). Corazon Aquino and her leadership was a clear example to such kind of system that while hailing from political clans and elites in power, she managed to make the supposedly seen inequality obscure by governing based on her “saintly” charisma (Thompson, 2002).

The Pulse Asia 2016 survey reveals that the top terms to describe a president are “*matapang, astig, brusko, at palabán*” (brave, tough, rude and aggressive) when citizens are asked to describe a president. It raises then a question: To whom must the President be brave? Duterte claimed a radical command to remove power from the oligarchy’s grip (Curato, 2016).

In a discussion of Demystifying Populism in the Philippines, Teehanki (2020) reiterated that the current country’s policies do not gain attraction and not resonating in the public. There is an existing solid based legitimation of populism for the current administration. As such, it is considerable and high time to understand the people’s sector and listen to the ground.

The Cory Aquino’s Moral politics approach that emphasizes moralistic discourse of the Filipino urban middle class take pride in their self-identification as upright citizens, democratic defenders and anti-corruption and good governance activists. Herewith, the poor sector is labeled as “bobotantes.” In contrast to the Populist Public approach of the Duterte administration, where his supporters are labeled as not irrational, dumb nor gullible voters. Rather, they are part of a growing constituency who are frustrated, angered and skeptical of the “typocrisy” of liberal reformism (Arguelles, 2018).

There is a very hyper partisan divided environment. This then places a relevant question as to how would these playouts in 2022 election? It revolves under the issue of continuity or consolidation that either populism in office turns out to be ineffective, in which case it soon forced back to opposition or it proves strong and consolidation in power.

This paper tries to reconcile these demands from the grounds to the higher echelons and intends to provide a platform of consolidating these populist opinions to further manifest a democratic type of government in an aid to withstand a growing issue of oligarchy and elitism – an issue that has been the reason to attack the Philippine government through various divisive propaganda and massive street protests. In addition to this, this paper also aims to emphasize the possibility of utilizing the Information and Communication Tools (ICT) as an opportunity to address the issue.

Objectives and Locale of the Study

Given the above Rationale, this paper specifically aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To provide an idea of bridging populist demands to national governance.
2. To provide a tangible and considerable report for Commission on Elections (COMELEC) perusal and aspiring political candidates (most especially in national positions) as bases for their platform construction.
3. To explore the potential ICT resources as a tool in consolidating these perceived gaps.

Conclusion

The pursuit of emphasizing the gap between populist demands and national democratic governance has been the underlying issue of this research. This paper tries to reconcile the possibility of bridging these local demands to be acknowledged in the various democratic frameworks most especially in the national level.

In the discussion, a possibility has been shown with the inclusion of ICT resources to empower local citizens in their participation of sharing their piece to national legislations as well as integrating an ICT strategy to accommodate these various demands.

For this research, a lot has still to be realized. This is most especially on the fact that the researcher also intends to further explore ideas and concepts as this paper could be a springboard into coming up with more realistic solutions.

In connection to this, there are a lot of realities to be acknowledged. For one, the reasons for “gaps” really exist, and therefore we conclude that these gaps are real. These roots back from the cry of populist communities or local communities “unheard” or “ignored.” We also see that some COMELEC initiatives are one-way approach in nature. But on the other end, such populist demands and opinions are possible opportunities for dialogue, consultation (as complexly proposed in this paper) coordination and collaboration with other agencies, including the non-government organizations (NGOs) and private institutions. But it is also noteworthy that to acknowledge such end is not to the extent of alienating the COMELEC in terms of its decision and integrity.

Lastly, given this situation alongside the aforementioned realities, it is high time to establish and re-build strategies for ICT inclusion even to the rural communities - a springboard to widen the work of e-governance in the country. This would empower LGUs, regardless of level or form, for ICT development.

These various perceived problems and opportunities, advantages and disadvantages should be emphasized to start working on a concept of a holistic participation in democratic governance. This includes the vast populist demands from local communities while we look forward to empowering every citizen not only the institutions and its actors in our pursuit of effective governance and development.

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