

STRONG PATRONAGE, WEAK PARTIES:

THE CASE FOR ELECTORAL SYSTEM REDESIGN IN THE PHILIPPINES

WHAT IS THE CORE MESSAGE OF THIS BOOK?

The prevailing electoral system in the Philippines—as provided by the 1987 Constitution—inadvertently guarantees the perpetuation of weak and incoherent political parties. *As long as parties are weak and lacking in coherence, the primary focus of political contention is much more likely to be on patronage and pork than on policies and programs.* As political reformers seek to address these fundamental problems of the Philippine polity, there is no better reform option than a well-constructed set of changes to the electoral system.



When we speak of electoral systems, we are **not** referring to the following: electoral administration, electoral adjudication, voter education, and international election monitoring.

WHAT IS AN ELECTORAL SYSTEM? WHAT ARE MAJOR VARIETIES OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AS FOUND AROUND THE WORLD?



Electoral systems are *the formulas used to convert votes to seats*. One formula, very familiar in the Philippines, is the plurality system: whoever wins the most votes (i.e., a plurality) obtains a seat. Most members of the House of Representatives are elected locally from single-member districts while Senators are elected nationally from a multiple-member district. Other common formulas, used elsewhere in the world, include varieties of proportional representation. There are of course many other types of systems, and it is also common for countries to adopt mixed or hybrid arrangements (combining, e.g., elements of plurality and proportional systems).

The term “electoral system” also refers to other specific arrangements that shape political outcomes, including *how executives and vice-executives are elected and how many seats are elected per district*.

WHY ARE POLITICAL SCIENTISTS COMMONLY SO CRITICAL OF PHILIPPINE POLITICAL PARTIES?

There has been a massive proliferation of parties in the post-Marcos Philippines. It is, without exaggeration, a complete free-for-all. From the presidential race to the Senate to the House to mayoral posts, the Philippines has an extraordinarily fractured party system, thanks in large part to the electoral system put in place in the 1987 Constitution.

PRESIDENTS

18 PARTIES

Across five national elections (1992 to 2016), there were a staggering 18 parties or coalitions of parties that put up candidates for Presidency (plus three candidates running as independents). (Casiple, Chapter Seven)

SENATE

8 PARTIES

Nineteen out of the current 24 members of the Upper House are dispersed across eight parties. (Ravanilla, Chapter Ten)

HOUSE

25 PARTY-LIST ORGANIZATIONS

Between 1998 and 2016, an average of 104 party-list organizations participated in the party list elections. The average number of winning parties exceeded 25. (Teehankee, Chapter Nine)

MAYORS

101 PARTIES

In just three election years from 2001, candidates for city or town mayor ran under 202 party banners. Those elected represent a remarkable 101 parties. (Ravanilla, Chapter Ten)



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Far from being stable, programmatic entities, [Philippine political parties have] proved to be not much more than convenient vehicles of patronage that can be set up, merged with others, split, resurrected, regurgitated, reconstituted, renamed, repackaged, recycled, or flushed down the toilet at any time.

- NATHAN QUIMPO

WHAT HAS CAUSED THE WEAKNESS OF POLITICAL PARTIES?

Electoral systems shape the relationship of candidates to parties. In the current Philippine system, parties are structurally challenged to exert discipline over their members.

- The first major example is the *multi-member plurality system*, used to elect 14,000 out of the 18,000 officeholders in the Philippines (for the Senate as well as councils at the provincial, city, and municipal levels). This system guarantees a high level of intra-party competition—which is a sure way of building a candidate-centric rather than a party-centric polity. (Ravanilla, Chapter Ten)
- Second, *the president and vice president (as well as governors/vice governors and mayors/vice mayors) are elected separately rather than as part of a joint ticket*. This separation is very rare internationally, as it opens up the possibility (frequently realized) that the two top officials of the land (as well as the province, city, and municipality) will come from different political parties. Once again, this fosters a candidate-centric rather than a party-centric polity. (Hutchcroft, Chapter One)
- Third, the oddest component of the Philippine electoral system—seemingly not found anywhere else—is the *Party List System (PLS)*. Its three-seat ceiling not only violates the principle of proportionality but also leads to the proliferation of small and ineffectual parties. This further contributes to the weakness and incoherence of the Philippine party system. (Teehankee, Chapter Nine)

WHY DO ELECTORAL SYSTEMS MATTER?

While there is no such thing as a magic bullet in the realm of political reform, electoral systems help to shape incentives. Incentives, in turn, help to shape behavior. If designed well, electoral systems can nurture polities that are oriented toward positive collective political outcomes. Where systems are not well designed, one should anticipate far more negative outcomes.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS ON DEMOCRACY?

The quality of democracy can be undermined by the weakness of political parties and the lack of political competition. These conditions put poor and marginalized citizens at a disadvantage. *A well-designed electoral reform can strengthen political parties and begin a shift towards a greater focus on policies and programs while reducing the relative importance of patronage and pork.*



WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS ON DEVELOPMENT?

In many settings around the world, development outcomes are undermined by political systems that privilege patronage over policy; skew service delivery to narrow electoral considerations, and feature election campaigns around vote-buying and personalities rather than policy positions and choices.



HOW DOES ELECTORAL SYSTEM REDESIGN RELATE TO OTHER PROPOSALS FOR POLITICAL REFORM?

While many other countries have used electoral system redesign to reform their political systems, it has generally been given far less attention in the Philippines.

When changing the structure of a democratic political system, three basic decisions must be considered. These decisions may be closely interrelated, but they are at the same time *three distinct components of political reform*. A survey of democracies reveals that choices across these three realms are mixed and matched around the world in many diverse ways.

The first decision is the *representational structures of the government*, with three major options: presidentialism, parliamentarism, and semi-presidentialism. The second decision is between *a unitary system and a federal system*, with huge variation *within* each category. The third is the *type(s) of the electoral system to be adopted*.

The book highlights the enormous potential of well-designed electoral system redesign to change the way that politics is done. Of the three major types of political reform, the book argues, electoral system reform has the greatest efficacy with the least risk of unintended consequences.

BUT AREN'T PHILIPPINE POLITICAL PARTIES REALLY JUST A PRODUCT OF PHILIPPINE POLITICAL CULTURE?

The weakness of Philippine political parties does not derive from some supposed national cultural barriers. Rather, institutional deficiencies bear the bulk of the blame for the many historical shortcomings of Philippine democracy. By changing the underlying incentives, through electoral system redesign, we can anticipate changes in how politics is practiced.

Consider the comparative experience of countries that have used electoral system redesign to try to elect larger percentages of women to legislatures. One particular type of electoral system has achieved striking success in giving women more seats in legislatures across a wide range of different political, social, and cultural contexts: in northern Europe, Latin America, and Africa (Reyes, Chapter Five). If similar electoral system reforms have demonstrated success across diverse cultural contexts, we can presume that imagined cultural propensities do not doom the Philippines to a future of weak political parties.



WHAT TYPE OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM PROMOTES STRONGER PARTIES AND ENHANCES WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION?

A recurring theme in the book is the virtue of an electoral system involving some element of *closed-list proportional representation* (CLPR)—known internationally as one of the most effective means of building stronger and more coherent political parties. In CLPR, parties choose and rank the candidates on their party list and thus exercise considerable discipline over the candidates that are put on the list.

The combination of CLPR with a *zipper system*, in which parties must alternate the names of women and men throughout the list, has proven itself to be highly effective in promoting greater gender equality.

Many countries have chosen mixed electoral systems, with some legislative seats chosen via single-member district plurality (as currently used for most seats in the Philippine House, to ensure the representation of geographical interests) and another significant portion of seats chosen via CLPR (to foster the growth of stronger political parties).

An essential starting point, in any process of electoral system redesign, is to identify what national goal or goals it is that one is seeking to promote. In the Philippines, political reformers have often voiced the need for measures that help both to undermine systems of patronage and to promote stronger political parties.

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