WYDE
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The cost of politics in the **Philippines**

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List of acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
COA	Commission on Audit
COC	Certificate of candidacy
COMELEC	Commission on Elections
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HoR	House of Representatives
KII	Key Informant Interview
OEC	Omnibus Election Code
PCIJ	Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism
SOCE	Statement of Contributions and Expenditures

Introduction

In 2025, the Philippines embarked on its mid-term elections under the Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. administration. More than 68.7 million voters registered, and nearly 82% turned out to vote for nationally elected senators, district representatives, provincial governors, city and municipal mayors, and local councillors.[1] Regular elections have been a feature of Philippine politics since the 1986 ouster of Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., the dictator who ruled the country for 20 years. The first were held in 1992, under a new constitution, which reintroduced measures to strengthening political institutions and civil society participation. However, electoral politics in the country remains clientelist and dynastic, with political parties weak and policy-oriented debates not decisive. This situation leaves little room for those without significant political and financial capital, especially women and the youth, to participate. While media discourse in the Philippines often highlights the high costs of seeking and maintaining political office, systematic analysis of the issue is lacking.

This report aims to fill this gap by conducting a qualitative analysis on the cost of legislative politics in the Philippines which is:

- **Comprehensive:** covering the costs involved from running campaigns to running public offices.
- **Multidimensional:** looking beyond the economic drivers to understand social, cultural and political dynamics.
- **Intersectional:** discussing the impacts based on gender, age, disability, indigeneity and/or a combination.

Furthermore, it seeks to unpack why and how these costs may impact differently on aspirants of various background - those part or outside of elite groups and traditional political dynasties, those with or without political parties or machineries, those with extensive political experience and those with none – and across genders. By understanding the relationships between these factors and electoral and political participation, the study also offers some actionable pathways for reform to enable a more inclusive and democratic elections and politics in the Philippines.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach, employing key informant interviews (KII), focus group discussions (FGD), desk review/document analysis, and a validation workshop as data-gathering methods. Among the documents reviewed are the primary measures that constitute the legal-policy-regulatory framework for elections in the Philippines, especially the Omnibus Election Code (OEC) or the Batas Pambansa Blg. (National Law No.) 881 enacted in 1985 and relevant jurisprudence. Actual Statement of Contributions and Expenditures (SOCE) submitted by 2025 midterm election candidates for senators and congressional positions, were also reviewed, albeit not extensively. In addition, the itemised expenditure items of the Senate and the House of Representatives (HoR) from the Commission on Audit budget were analysed with respect to the costs of maintaining public office.

Semi-structured interview guides were developed for the KIIs and FGD, with the key questions formulated to correspond to the research objectives. Sampling for both KIIs and FGD was done through a purposive approach, ensuring representation and diversity across political affiliations, sex at birth, age, geography and ethnicity. Invitations for KII were extended to former and current lawmakers from different political parties, campaign managers and strategists, academic and public opinion leaders, former and current election and other government officials, and in the latter part, an investigative journalist. For the FGD, electoral watchdogs, leaders from youth, women and labour groups, and other civil society organisers were invited. In total 11 KIIs were conducted along with one FGD comprising five participants. To validate the initial findings, a forum was conducted that provided a platform for further feedback to be gathered and integrated into the report through a combination of a dedicated four-member panel of reactors as well as during an open question and answer session.

Table 1: Profiles of research participants

Method	Profile of participants
Key informant interviews	• Six female, five male • Incumbent senator/senatorial candidate • Incumbent/former congressional representatives • Youth leader • Journalist • Public relations expert • Campaign manager • Former government officials
Focus group discussion	• Two female, three male • Representatives of labour, youth, women and citizen action CSOs • Campaign manager
Validation forum	• 38 participants – 16 female and 22 youth – from government, academia, trade unions, political parties and CSOs • Four panel reactors: an incumbent party list representative, a political party officer, an elections focused CSO leader and a COMELEC official)

Limitations and challenges

The scope of the study limited the coverage to elective public office in the legislative branch of the government at the national level, which in the Philippines consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Local councils at the provincial and city/municipal levels, as well as the Bangsamoro parliament, were not included in the assessment or the analysis.

This was the main limitation of the study, whilst two key challenges emerged in conducting the research:

- *Lack of direct participation of traditional politicians.* While the researchers sought to engage mostly reform-oriented politicians and candidates as primary participants in the study, they also recognised the importance of interviewing politicians from traditional and powerful families as well as organisations typically associated with less progressive or democratic political blocs. This would have facilitated a more representative assessment of the financial costs of seeking and holding public office as public reports indicate that the most expensive campaigns involve them. However, finding known email addresses of these already retired individuals was difficult, and among a few who were sent email invitations, none responded favourably.
- *Limited time for in-person interviews.* Several in-person interviews with high-profile candidates and incumbent officials that had to be shortened to no more than 20-25 minutes limiting the ability of the researchers to cover all areas of inquiry. In response the researchers prioritised the most crucial questions to ensure these important viewpoints were captured.

Factors shaping costly electoral politics in the Philippines

The Philippines' political system and its liberal democratic model are products of the United States' colonial legacy. This system dismantled pre-existing indigenous political structures based on kinship ties, and the Spanish regime's *frailocracy.*[2] While there have been changes over time, contemporary political institutions in the Philippines are governed by the 1987 Constitution, produced in the aftermath of the Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. dictatorship. This constitution established the presidential system and a unitary state, with a bicameral legislature. The fervour of the People Power Revolution[3] and the strong desire to prevent another strong-man rule characterised the ideals contained in the charter. For this reason, a bill of rights, term limits, a call for the parliament to ban political dynasties, a multi-party system, and the institution of the party-list system to support marginalised groups, were included.

The President, both the head of state and government, is directly elected under a plurality system, first-past-the post winner takes all process. The Vice President is elected separately and does not necessarily have to come from the same political party or coalition as the President. The legislature or Congress is bicameral, with an upper house, the Senate, comprising 24 members who serve six year terms that are consecutively renewable once, and a lower chamber, the HoR, comprised of 318 members for the current 20th Congress who are elected to serve a term of three years for a maximum of three consecutive terms. HoR members are elected in two ways: 80% are chosen through a first-past-the-post system to represent single-member legislative districts, with the remaining 20% elected based on the proportional share of the vote achieved by their party, from party lists.

In seeking elective office, politicians incur a wide range of costs. In the Philippines, the bulk of these costs are spent before the official campaign period, as designated by law.[4] These can be considered the unofficial costs of seeking political office, whilst permitted expenses – those spent within the campaign period - can be more broadly considered as the official cost. Table 2 provides a succinct summary of the different types of costs incurred by political aspirants before, during, and even after the official campaign periods.

Table 2: Types of costs incurred before, during and after campaign periods

Types of cost*	Estimated amounts[5]	Notes
Traditional advertisements and surveys		
TV	P700,000 per 30-sec placement	Political aspirants already spend on ads even prior to the election period, some even at excessive levels.
Billboards	• P500,000-P1.5 million per month (dynamic) • P3-P5 million per month (static)	
Radio	P10,000 per spot	
Print	P250,000 to P2.6 million	Amount represents total spending among select 2025 midterm poll candidates
Election surveys	• P1.5-4 million (national) • P100-500,000 (local)	Sample size of 1,200 – 2,400 samples nationwide.
Campaign/public relations strategy		
Branding deck	P500,000 – P1.5 million	
Retainer fees	P500,000 – P800,000 per month ('war time')	Retainer's fee tends to decrease after the election ('peace time'): P300,000-P350,000 per month, more for crisis management)
Social media management		
Troll operator	P15-20,000 per month	
Content creator	P20-25,000 per content	

Note: Campaign staff compensation is a cost but there is a lack of comprehensive data to include it here

Sources: KIIs, validation forum feedback and candidates' SOCE's

The study's findings regarding the mapping of campaign costs and finances are subsequently outlined, integrating results from interviews, focus group discussion, desk reviews, and validation forum feedback.

Advertisements, which often predate the official campaign period, are the biggest cost

Advertisements are the top cost of entering politics. Expenditure covers advertisements released not only on traditional media – TV, radio and billboards - but also on social media - Facebook, YouTube, and, more recently, TikTok, a former elections commissioner noted, which the body has now formally recognised as mass media. A campaign strategist interviewed for the study estimated that a 30-second TV advert can cost at least P700,000, whilst placements on billboards carry different price tags depending on type: P500,000-1.5 million per month for dynamic billboards and P3-5 million per month for static billboards. When it comes to radio one informant who ran in the previous midterm elections suggested that a candidate needs P10,000 for every spot (short media interview or appearance) and that this was a conservative estimate.

These sentiments were supported by expenditure data covering the campaign period. The two highest spenders for the senatorial race based on their submitted SOCEs—Camille Villar and Imee Marcos —spent almost 98% and 91%, respectively, of their reported campaign funds on advertisements.[6] This pattern is also evident in the reported expenses of other successful senatorial candidates but does not include the amounts spent in the pre-campaign period. If one were to include the adverts aired roughly a year before the campaign period, which is effectively unregulated by law or policy in the Philippines, the share of advertisement costs would remain the most substantial; higher than the total spending allowed under the Omnibus Election Code.[7] The Supreme Court ruling in Penera vs. COMELEC (G.R. No. 181613), in 2009 not only allowed "premature campaigning" but it also delineated the costs incurred before the official campaign period, leading to a significant increase in this period.

For instance, from January to September 2024, the month prior to the filing of Certificate of Candidacy (COC), both Villar and Marcos had already spent P1 billion each on multimedia adverts, according to reporting by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ).[8] However, two other senatorial aspirants, Abigail Binay and Francis Tolentino, also spent at least P1 billion each on adverts during the same period and both lost their senatorial race, suggesting limits on the extent that votes can be secured from extensive media expenditure alone. Nonetheless, according to one incumbent politician:

> *"Moneyed and powerful politicians spend a lot [on adverts], they bulk buy and even buy spots before the campaign period, that way they can generate buzz and emerge top of mind in surveys".*

The politician described it as a "vicious cycle" where internal surveys are deployed to develop political adverts, which in turn influence survey outcomes, which result in more access to potential donors. Surveys and adverts are very costly in the Philippines but provide an edge for many politicians. Political and economic elites and taipans/businessmen, contribute to the election kitty of their candidates, most preferably the likely winners, as indicated by surveys that are both privately commissioned and publicly undertaken.

Costs for campaign strategies and operations are another significant area of expenditure

Establishing and sustaining a good image and compelling message also takes a lion's share of the expenses made by individuals running for elective posts in the Philippines. A public relations (PR) firm typically charges P500,000 to P1.5 million for developing a branding deck, which may go higher for names and personalities that need an extra boost in public awareness. A corresponding item is the retainer's fee, amounting to P500-800,000 per month, according to one informant. This period is considered "war time," so the cost is notably higher than those charged in non-political settings or outside of formal campaign periods. After elections, especially for candidates who win a legislative seat, the PR remains important, but retainer fees drop to P300-350,000 as successful politicians use in-house teams, engaging external PR firms mostly to deal with reputational crisis management.

Identifying where this type of cost is reflected in the SOCE is difficult as there is no specific line item that corresponds to it. The closest item under which these costs appear to fall, per Section 102 of the OEC, is advertisements, since the production of these adverts involves branding work and, according to an informant, PR firms have increasingly served as mediators in advert placement and payment. To a lesser extent, candidates can also claim to have incorporated them in the item for staff compensation by categorising them as part of campaign staff. The same set of candidates with the highest advert spending also tend to pay huge sums for PR strategy, with most belonging to established elite families and political dynasties.

Printed campaign materials, and the conduct/facilitation of ground operations or local activities is another integral cost before and during the official campaign period. For re-elected Senator Bong Go,[9] who took the top spot in the 2025 senatorial race, campaign materials, or collaterals, came second to advertisements in the types of costs with the highest amount of spending; reported at P8.2 million or 6.5% of his total P126.7 million campaign expenditure. His third largest expenditure item was listed as travel expenses (P4.18 million). A similar pattern can be observed in the case of returning Senator Kiko Pangilinan: whilst adverts are the expenditure items with the biggest amount of spending, second is travel expenses (P1.13 million), followed by the printing and distribution of materials (P969,560).

However, as with advertisements, the costs incurred by repeat or new aspirants for public office before the official campaign period are not accounted for in the SOCE and are not regulated by Commission on Elections (COMELEC). But given the frequent trips and local events attended by prospective candidates for senatorial or congressional positions ahead of the official campaign period, these could be expected to increase significantly. Here incumbent candidates have an advantage as it remains difficult to differentiate between these ground operations and the regular implementation of their office's programmes and activities, which are funded by the state.

Expenses for social media management, particularly troll and counter-troll operations

Since 2016, the role of social media in campaigns has broadened. The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) and other digital technologies further complicates the problem by making it easier to produce and distribute misleading, dishonest, or blatantly false information on Facebook, TikTok, and other social media platforms. This development enables two opposing pathways for candidates to engage on social media.

On the one hand, discovering the potential of social media to shift the balance of power among political contenders by influencing public perception, some candidates have used it as a campaign tool to promote their candidacies by using digital troll armies, at times with indications of foreign interference.[10] According to one informant, individuals in online-troll networks are paid between P15-20,000 per month for this work, whilst one FGD participant, who works on youth governance, noted that payments per content could reach as much as P50,000.

Others focus on trying to counter disinformation attacks. This is particularly the case for women, who are often the focus of disinformation campaigns of a generic nature, but also those that are largely sexist and misogynistic.[11] However, these efforts are often less organised and rely on unpaid volunteers and supporters alike coming forward online to fight disinformation in their individual capacities. One party-list candidate noted how his significant Facebook following translated into a defence wall against organised but operationally fragmented disinformation machinery in the 2025 polls. But without a clear line for capturing these expenditures in the SOCE, it remains difficult to ascertain who is spending what in this area and they remain loosely monitored and regulated as a result.

Vote buying persists and constitutes a substantial, if hidden, chunk of election costs

Vote buying is deeply entrenched in the Philippine political and electoral culture. For one informant, it may well be the single greatest factor why it would take hundreds of millions of pesos to run an effective campaign in a competitive race for senatorial and congressional positions. One FGD participant recalled how the price tag of votes has increased from less than P1,000 to an average of P3-5000 and even as high as P8-10,000 per person in some areas. Others pointed out that at times vote buying comes in two waves—the first as an introductory offer ('*pakimkim*') and the second, and the last, as pre-election day thanksgiving ('*pasasalamat*'). One informant described the whole practice as "masalimuot" (complex and messy), but it remains a critical part of electoral success.

For individuals who intend to run on a progressive ticket using relatively inexpensive campaigns, this cost is not only unaffordable but also untenable. One former candidate who saw herself as a challenger to the status quo, found it difficult to navigate this aspect of the Filipino culture in elections remarking that, "I am against vote buying, but there were really those who sought money. What I told them is, 'I am the discount'. The approach was also cultural... What matters is how courageous you are to confront the problem and suffer the consequences."

Vote buying is also an obstacle for non-incumbent candidates. Many of the research participants emphasised how recent government programmes and social services are utilised and abused as a tool for patronage politics that can help secure votes for the next election. One respondent, an investigative journalist, noted a surge in the awarding of contracts in the last quarter of the year prior to the campaign period for projects in social protection as well as public works or infrastructure.[12] 'Ayuda'[13], one-time support in form of cash assistance and emergency employment to minimum wage earners, has become a system for handouts devoid of a meaningful developmental objective according to respondents. For one respondent, 'ayuda' has transformed into a legitimised form of vote buying, making the informal and illegal practice somewhat "legal". In this context, aspirants holding public office with access to vast public resources are in a beneficial position compared to others.

Gaps between reported and actual campaign expenditures by candidates are vast

If SOCE were the only document to measure the cost of entering politics, almost all candidates would turn out compliant with the maximum allowable campaign spending in a given election cycle. Senatorial and party list groups, both nationwide in scope, are allowed to spend P3 per registered voter, amounting to P205 million in 2025. Whilst those without parties or running as independent candidates have a higher spending limit of P5 per registered voter, a total of P343 million in 2025. In the senatorial elections, Camille Villar, the top spender based on SOCE, reported almost P180 million in combined campaign expenditures (see Table 3).

But these reported figures are well below what most respondents estimate the real cost of entering politics to be. To them, the allowable spending limit of P205 million for the 2025 midterm elections is only the minimum required to run an effective senatorial campaign, but it can go up to P500 million for more aggressive campaigns. One PR specialist had developed a formula for estimating how much a candidate would likely need to succeed. For a nationwide position, they argued the amount needed was the number of votes needed multiplied by 24. For the senatorial race, based on the number of votes required being 17 million, then the total amount would be P480 million. For congressional or district representatives, the formula is different and requires multiplying the number of votes needed by 420. Given that the average district has 269,417 registered voters[14], this would amount to P56.7 million based on the need to secure a minimum of 50% of voters. Neither formula includes vote buying costs, which can be significant.

Furthermore this declared expenditure only covers the official campaign period. Therefore, all costs incurred by prospective candidates before the campaign period are neither considered nor regulated as campaign costs. Given that the total advertisement expenses by individuals who subsequently became 2025 candidates, across 2024, exceeded P10 billion[15] it is important to consider this reality in broadening conceptions about the cost of politics in the Philippines.

Table 3: List of 2025 senatorial candidates and their total reported expenditures

Candidate	Total spend (P)	Notes
Camille Villar	179.64 million	Won; member Villar political family
Lito Lapid	163.58 million	Won; re-elected
Pia Cayetano	162 million	Won; re-elected
Benjamin Abalos	160.49 million	Lost; former Interior and Local Government Secretary
Abigail Binay	157.86 million	Lost; former Mayor of Makati City and daughter of former Vice President Jejomar Binay
Francis Tolentino	149.84 million	Lost as incumbent
Maria Imelda 'Imee' Marcos	139.30 million	Won; re-elected; sister of incumbent President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.
Ronald 'Bato' dela Rosa	128.73 million	Won; re-elected; former police chief of former President Rodrigo Duterte
Bong Revilla	128.13 million	Lost as incumbent
Christpher Lawrence 'Bong' Go	127.31 million	Won; re-elected
Francis 'Kiko' Pangilinan	119.40 million	Won; former senator and 2022 candidate for Vice President
Rodante Marcoleta	112.86 million	Won; former party list representative
Erwin Tulfo	110.35 million	Won; brother of incumbent Senator Raffy Tulfo
Tito Sotto	96.54 million	Won; former senator and noontime show TV host
Ping Lacson	18.95 million	Won; former senator
Heidi Mendoza	2.5 million	Lost; former Audit Commissioner
Sonny Matula	Less than 1 million	Lost; labour leader

Sources: COMELEC as cited in Fonbuena (2025). "Top spender Camille Villar reports P179.6-M spending in 2025 campaign." https://pcij.org/2025/07/03/top-spender-camille-villar-lito-lapid-pia-cayetano-2025-senate-race/; and KIIs.

Patronage politics as a political resource

Agpalo argues that legislators occupy three roles, articulator of interests, fiscalizer, and patron.[16] As articulator of interests, legislators act as lawmakers and advocates of policies, and as fiscalizer, they provide oversight functions on the executive and the judiciary. These are both defined in the 1987 constitution, but their role as a patron is not. According to Agpalo[17]:

> *"The role of patron required the member of Congress to be defender, protector, or father of his constituency, district, province, or region. As such, he provided (1) patronage to his constituents, such as legal, medicinal, and other personal services; (2) contributions to barrio or town fiestas; (3) recommendations for jobs, promotions, transfers, and the like; (4) uniforms or trophies to athletic teams; and (5) other favours. He also took care that funds appropriated for a footbridge, a schoolhouse, and other public works in his district, province, or town were released by the appropriate agency."*

In the Philippine's electoral politics client-patron ties between leaders and constituents are strong. They are why politicians are expected to provide direct monetary and non-monetary assistance during *kasal, binyag, libing* (wedding, baptism, and funeral). According to one research participant, "unending requests for assistance or solicitation from constituents adds pressure on representatives… a reality that forces them to be resourceful". Finances come from legislator's budgets, pork barrel allocation, congressional insertions and amendment, and financial transfers to indigents.

Legislators' budget

According to the standardised salaries of public officials and employees for 2025, Congress members receive P293,191- 334,059 monthly. However, aside from salaries there are other expenses related to their functions such as allowances, local and international travel, the provision of staff, professional and consultancy fees, supplies and materials, rental of motor vehicles, and capital outlays which they can access. In 2020, a total of P2.2 billion was allocated in allowances for all 24 senators while members of the then 300-member HoR spent P7.9 billion.[18] Because both the Speaker of the House and the Senate President have immense power over each chamber's accounts, their allies may request additional funding support for travel or other activities, thereby further augmenting these allowances.

Intra-chamber patronage is therefore an important mechanism that drives legislators' behaviour. A key issue is the use of the maintenance and operating expenses over which the Commission on Audit (COA) had been demanding tighter control and transparency. However, Congress has argued that such funds can be liquidated by certification and without official receipts as these are normally allocated for constituents' needs.[19] In other words, this process is part of the "delicate and unique nature" of congressional operations.

Pork barrel allocations and congressional insertions

The politics of pork barrel is "a particular type of constituency service through which a legislator's geographic constituency benefits from the distribution of public works projects".[20] However, the discretion provided to legislators in allocating such funds, enables corrupt activities to take place. This typically happens, for example, by enabling them to directly select and favour contractors to implement infrastructure projects, and/or to provide funds to bogus non-government organisations.

The Countrywide Development Fund, later renamed the Priority Development Assistance Fund, started in the 1990s, and provided legislators with funds to identify projects for their constituents and favoured local government units. Two types of patronage existed under this set-up: "grassroots-patronage," referring to constituents where this is lodged, and "local government patronage," which focused on local officials in areas where the projects were implemented.[21] In the 2000's, these were further divided into "soft" projects such as scholarships and livelihood programmes; and "hard" projects such as small infrastructure items. However, a huge corruption scandal in 2013, which led to the arrest and imprisonment of three legislators and some of their staff, prompted the Supreme Court to declare this fund unconstitutional.

But the Supreme Court's ban on pork barrel has seen Congress devise new ways to allocate funds for their "pet projects." Congressional insertions, which refers to legislators' practice of inserting new items in the budget bill to fund select infrastructure projects, have become commonplace.[22] The process has been criticised for being prone to corruption, lacking in transparency, and non-alignment and consultation with regional and local plans. In 2025, a senator revealed that a staggering P100 billion of insertions had been lost to corruption that yielded ghost, unfinished, and substandard flood control projects alone.[23] Following this, a series of congressional investigations accused some legislators of benefitting from such expenditure through kickbacks from favoured contractors. These accusations highlighted "specialised patronage" or "patronage contracting" in which beneficiary contractors donate to campaigns of a legislator in exchange for the promise of projects or contracts.[24] In some cases legislators even own construction firms or have familial connections with them. According to an investigative report from the PCIJ, the former chair of the House Appropriations Committee's construction firm, secured contracts worth billions of pesos for flood control projects from 2022 to 2025.[25]

Direct transfers

The social welfare, health, and labour departments provide financial transfers to indigents. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, these financial transfers were expanded significantly. From 2022 to 2024, P300 billion was allocated to these programmes, known as *ayuda* in local parlance. While this financial assistance serves as a lifeline for low-income Filipinos, a recent assessment noted that, aside from weak targeting mechanisms, it also serves as a means of political patronage, given that politicians are allowed to identify beneficiaries, while others are present during payouts.[26] This lack of transparency, weak accountability mechanisms, and political patronage at different stages provide ample discretion for legislators to acquire means for their re-election and those of their families. As a result, media reporting has increasingly dubbed this as another "pork barrel in disguise".[27]

Many of these potential sources of funds available to those holding political office, gives incumbent politicians an undue advantage when they run for re-election.[28] One candidate who ran for the first time and lost in the 2025 elections, went in knowing that she lacked the machinery and funds making it "almost impossible"[29] to win.

Drivers of the cost of politics

While electoral politics in the Philippines is democratic in form and substance, persistent and daunting challenges remain owing to several interrelated factors; the lack of well-developed political parties, personality-centred politics, dynastic dominance, patronage-driven practices, and weak enforcement of electoral rules. Together, these factors make political representation a space for the wealthy and the moneyed, providing little room for those without financial resources and social capital – especially non-dynastic women and youth - to win elections.

Elite and political dynasty capture

The endurance, ubiquity, and scope of political dynasties and families in the Philippines is alarming given its significant implications for democratic representation and policymaking. The elite composition of legislators can be illustrated by looking at their net worth.[30] In 2020, the richest senator's net worth was approximately US$77 million while her counterpart in the HoR had double this amount.[31] At the other end of the scale the least wealthy senator, with an estimated net worth of US$177,000[32], is still far better off than the average family, with annual income estimated to be US$6,023[33]. Most representatives belong to families with big business interests or are business owners themselves. In 2024, the Ombudsman stated that 67 construction company owners who are at the same time members of the HoR have been investigated for potential violation of anti-graft law; whilst eight out of ten district representatives are from political families.[34]

Given the resources at their disposal, candidates from well-entrenched political dynasties generally have higher chances of victory as opponents, unless they come from another dynastic family, rarely have the resources to compete. In some cases at the local level, candidates run unopposed in electoral contests, stifling competitors with well-resourced campaigns, borne out of their familial resources and connections. Although terms are limited, political families swap political positions, often replacing men with women but do so in such a way that the new occupants are largely placeholders for the former occupant. A common, though under-researched, perception is that the male members of a political family remain the powerbrokers behind the scenes, even when women are in formal positions of power.

Absence of well-developed political parties

In the 1950s, a two-party system existed but this was dismantled under the Marcos, Sr. dictatorship. However the multi-party system that was created by the 1987 Constitution has generated candidate-centric parties prone to 'turncoatism' that lack serious platforms.
A consequence of this is that elections are highly unpredictable, personality-oriented, and generally devoid of substantive policy discourse. This makes it easy for legislators to jump on the "presidential bandwagon"[35] – the practice of switching to the winning President's coalition to gain access to pork and other privileges while in office. While Congress has the power of the purse, the function of releasing allocated funds rests with the President and budget department. Thus, while separation of powers is an ideal enshrined in the country's charter, legislative-executive relations has been characterised as "separate but not equal".[36]

Adding to this, the lack of institutionalised primaries or open and transparent party nominations engenders backroom talks and generally makes decisions opaque. With the financial cost of nomination of politicians by a political party often borne by business elites or tycoons closely linked to them,[37] this gives them much more power over both candidates and parties pronouncements on key issues, primarily because parties need them to bankroll campaigns. This further weakens political parties by making them captive to business interests.

Personality-based patronage politics prevails

The absence of a well-developed political party system combined with the elite and dynastic capture of politics enables a culture of patronage and personality-based politics. Historically, the HoR leadership is allied with the President, and as such, the House Speaker, normally the President's choice, has enormous means to consolidate power and shepherd the administration's legislative and political agenda. Aside from the alliance with the President, the speaker has control over committee appointments, prioritisation of bills, the HoR budget, and the national budget processes enabling legislators to insert or amend provisions favouring pet projects. Although the

Senate is traditionally characterised as the launching pad for higher office, and is generally more independent than the HoR, the Senate President has technically the same powers as the Speaker, and thus also in shaping intra-chamber politics and patronage.

The Philippines “celebrity culture”[38] can impact on electoral costs in two ways. First, celebrity politicians not only have an advantage because of their existing popularity, they also often have financial resources and connections to meet the political costs. Secondly, the proliferation of celebrity endorsements and, more recently, vloggers and social media influencers increases the cost of seeking political office for all, as this often is done in a transactional way. One research participant categorised these as “glitter” (celebrities) and “gigabytes” (influencers and vloggers), a new addition to the “3Gs” of Filipino electoral politics: guns, goons, and gold.[39]

Outdated and poorly enforced legal framework

The current legal framework governing elections and campaigns comprises several statutes, foremost among them the 1987 Constitution, which established COMELEC as an independent body with administrative, judicial, and quasi-judicial powers.[40] COMELEC administers the country’s elections with the assistance of its local offices. It registers political parties, administers automated voting, regulates campaign financing whenever there are reported violations and undertakes random manual audits.

However, the lack of strict campaign finance enforcement, the weak human and budgetary resource capacity of COMELEC, vote buying, electoral fraud and outdated electoral rules that are already inconsistent with social and online media campaigns and international standards inhibits its effectiveness.[41] While some of these have been addressed by COMELEC through circulars and policy directives, election spending is poorly regulated and this increases the costs, contributing to less inclusive political representation. Respondents also highlighted that the framework for campaign finance regulation was also problematic given that it contains limits on spending but none on contributions.[42]

Synchronous and regular elections

Another important consideration to the cost of elections is the conduct of synchronous national and local elections. While the logic for synchronous election is to cut on cost for election administration, the cost implication for candidates and political parties at the national level is profound. National candidates are not only expected to support their individual campaign but also to provide financial support for allied local candidates. Further observations point out to the frequency of, and limited period in between, elections as another factor. With elections conducted every three years, politicians are perpetually in campaign spending mode.

Geographic and developmental inequities

Geography, uneven development, lack of access to opportunities, and the urban-rural divide increase the cost of elections. While the Philippines is a middle-income country, the low-income sector occupies the bulk of voters and are often targets of vote buying.[43] A politician from Mindanao noted that while vote buying happens everywhere, the intensity and scale of vote buying in Mindanao is unparalleled, with reports of USD 100-300 per vote,[44] a reality that can be attributed to severe inequality and heightened poverty. Mindanao is home to some of the poorest provinces in the country.

Volunteerism and people-powered campaigns on the rise

Despite the prevailing cost of politics and its challenges, a practice of volunteerism and people-powered campaigns has emerged as a response to money politics. Politicians who have strong links with these organised groups and volunteers, and who are in political parties, can incur much reduced costs as a result. Progressive candidates invest their time and resources in local community organising or base-building to harness sustained political support from the grassroots.

They can then rely on these volunteers to support their campaigns by putting up posters, monitoring polling units and creating online content promoting their candidacies. Volunteers can also include celebrities, influencers, and artists who support their preferred candidates and are not paid. Whilst their success still remains limited, the loss of some celebrity politicians and dynastic families in the 2025 elections was seen as representing a partial shift in societal attitudes. The local political landscape is changing in the view of one key informant who said that “at the local levels, people are looking for leaders who offer solutions to their problems”, whilst another felt that there was growing anger with moneyed politicians.

Implications for women

The high cost of elections, along with the weakness of political parties, the lack of a gender quota and the first-past-the-post electoral system[45], impact on the political participation of Filipino women. Although Filipino women gained the right to suffrage in 1937, nine years before its independence from the United States, the Philippines has yet to reach the 30% threshold of women's representation prescribed by the United Nations, hovering just below that mark in the past five elections (see Table 4). However, many of these elected women are often referred to as dynastic "benchwarmers," placeholders for male family members awaiting the lapse of their term limits. In fact a 2025 study suggested that political families are the main entry points for women in politics.[46] This means that wealthy and pedigreed women dominate electoral politics whilst non-dynastic women are overlooked for political office and when they do run, their chances of success are low. This reality was emphasised by a female politician who said that "if you are not part of a dynasty, you have to work doubly hard compared to men."[47]

Table 4: Women's share of seats in HoR (2001-2025)

Election year	Women elected	% of women in HoR
2001	38	**17.1%**
2004	37	**15.7%**
2007	49	**20.4%**
2010	62	**22.1%**
2013	79	**27.3%**
2016	87	**29.8%**
2019	85	**28%**
2022	85	**27.3%**
2025	89	**28.4%**

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, https://data.ipu.org/parliament/PH/PH-LC01/

Aside from dynasties, gendered norms cost women their rightful place in the political sphere. According to the 2023 Gender and Social Norms Index, Filipinos have a low regard for women's rights and leadership skills. A PR practitioner echoed this when he remarked that "politics in the Philippines is an old boy's network," adding that predominant attitudes towards women politicians are either "seat warmers" or "bitchy firebrands."[48] Similarly, a female politician emphasised the multiple burdens women have as a barrier to political participation, especially for low-income groups:

“Firstly, because misogyny persists in our society, women always have to prove their worth many times over. Even if we don’t openly discuss it, many people still perceive women politicians as weak.” [49]

But there are small signs of progress. A party-list group’s main consideration in selecting one of its 2025 nominees was that she must be a woman from a marginalised sector and coming from a disadvantaged geographical area. According to a campaign manager, “if she ran in the 1980s it would have been a problem”[50], but in 2025 she was successful in her bid. While traditional beliefs about women persist, the spaces for women participation in politics has widened due to the extensive work done by women organisations in community organising, politics and public service over many years which has shifted attitudes and strengthened reputations. Nevertheless, the multiple burdens facing women, especially new entrants to politics, which are both financial as well as socio-cultural, persist.

Implications for youth

While the Philippines is considered a young population[51], with a median population age of 25.3 years according to the Philippine Statistics Authority[52], the representatives in Congress, Senate and HoR have a median age of 60. Only 17 out of 318, or 5.4%, percent of HoR members are aged 25-30.[53] None are younger than 25 as the 1987 Constitution, Article VI, Sections 3 and 5, provides a minimum age of 35 for a Senator and 25 for HoR members. Legal barriers are therefore a factor inhibiting youth participation, but cost obstacles are the major challenge to the competitiveness of those who do contest as illustrated in analysis of those currently elected from the youth bracket. Fifteen of the 17 youth HoR members come from political dynasties who can utilise the resources available from these networks as a result. The exceptions are the two representatives from the Kabataan and Kamanggagawa party lists who are backed by a base of organised youth groups and labour groups respectively.

Table 5: HoR members by age, gender

Age range	Overall (%)	% of that age range that are female
21-30	5.4	35.3
31-40	15.6	26.5
41-50	23.6	35.1
51-60	28.3	30.3
61-70	19.1	21.7
71 and above	8	16

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2026, https://data.ipu.org/parliament/PH/PH-LC01/data-on-youth/

Conclusions and recommendations

This report has endeavoured to identify the types of costs in electoral politics, factors shaping the cost of politics and the extent they impact on the participation of non-dynastic and non-moneyed individuals, particularly youth and women. In response to the challenges identified it proposes a series of recommendations and interventions that can help enhance the integrity of electoral politics in the Philippines. Recognising the entrenched and systemic barriers for greater and meaningful electoral participation, the recommendations address barriers at various levels through proposed policy reforms, capacity building and institutional development, advocacy and education, and economic and social development.

Legal, policy and regulatory framework

- A complete overhaul of the Omnibus Election Code is needed. Electoral rules must be definitive and coherent to ensure better enforcement, particularly on the nebulous concept of 'campaign' period. There is also a need to update reforms relative to recent developments in campaigns such as the role of social media, the use of AI, and online financial transfers, to enhance transparency and accountability in accounting for campaign finance. Along with this, limitations on campaign donations and transparency mechanisms must be instituted and enforced.
- A political party development law that incorporates a gender quota is needed to encourage political parties to field more women candidates. Access to a gender fund from the state can be an incentive for parties, which can be used for training and recruitment activities for non-dynastic women candidates. Incentivising political parties to field non-dynastic women and normalise their political participation can contribute to a gradual shift in attitudes.
- The existing Party-List Law must be thoroughly reviewed to truly make it an entry point for non-dynastic and non-moneyed politicians. To ensure the entry of more women and young people, a zipper type of list can be explored, in which women and the youth are prioritised.
- The regulation of political dynasties is imperative to prevent their undue influence and advantage in electoral politics. This can take many forms: regulating the number of family members who can run in one electoral cycle, regulating succession, or preventing them from running based on the degree of consanguinity.
- The report suggests a strong link between the cost of maintaining political office and electoral politics. For this reason, anti-corruption laws and discourse must be framed in ways that establish this link. Both the HoR and the Senate should have a Code of Conduct that guides members in the proper and transparent use of funds so that civil society groups, the media, and the general public can better monitor congressional spending.

Capacity building and institutional development

- COMELEC must be strengthened in terms of human and financial resources and stronger institutional arrangements for gender mainstreaming and campaign finance monitoring.

Capability-building of staff and digital transformation of its operations and database management can enable it to better monitor campaign expenditure and implement rules on vote-buying. The inclusion of a commissioner representative from civil society should also be explored.

- Political parties, social movements, and civil society groups must be trained on developing gender-responsive and youth-oriented programmes to encourage and prepare young women, men, and non-binary individuals entering politics at all levels.

Advocacy and education

- Civil society and investigative journalists serving as watchdogs to the legislature must be supported to enhance transparency and accountability in governance.
- An enhanced civic education campaign targeting the practice of vote buying should be a priority. Alongside this, training is needed for political parties, campaign managers and practitioners on people-centred scientific campaigning that utilises data and social media analytics and can shift the focus away from short-term monetary incentives to more policy-driven development discussions.

Economic and social development

- Financial transfers and assistance to low-income groups, including infrastructure projects, must be based on science and evidence-based targeting, and aligned with the goals of the Philippine Development Plan, and sectoral and local development plans. Moreover, financial transfers to disadvantaged groups must be implemented by relevant executive departments, without political interference.

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[4] The election period is six months prior to election day. Within the election period, national candidates are granted a campaign period of 90 days, while local level contenders are granted 45 days.

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[13] Ayuda or aide is a collective term for various monetary and non-monetary support provided by elected politicians as an out of pocket expense or from various government programmes, such as conditional cash transfers and emergency cash for work employment initiatives.

[14] In 2025, based on COMELEC data, there were 68,431,965 registered voters across 254 congressional districts. The 3rd district of the Province of Rizal has the greatest number of registered voters of 521,954; while the lone district of Batanes province has the least number with 13,655 registered voters.

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