

THE ECONOMICS OF LOCAL ELECTIONS: A CLOSER LOOK AT VOTE BUYING IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF MALANOY

*Michael P. Cañares, C.P.A, LL.B.
Holy Name University
Tagbilaran City*

Introduction

While it is an undeniable fact that vote-buying is an accepted and a regular activity in Philippine local elections, there are only a few studies that indicate the propensity, if not the gravity of the problem more particularly in the context of municipal elections, where the relationship of the politician and the voter is sometimes reduced to a personal level. While money undoubtedly flood the streets during election days, not much has been said regarding the extent it can significantly affect the decision of the voter during election day and the politician's standing in the election results.

This research attempts to answer some of the basic questions regarding the phenomenon of the vote-buying by dealing with the following: 1). How much do local candidates need to give to capture a significant number of votes to win in an election; 2). where do local politicians source funds for vote buying and how do they spend it; 3). how do local politicians distribute or dispense election money? (contrasting "inangayan" and "palit"); 4). how do local politicians ensure that voters vote for them; 5). how much do local voters need to receive to influence their votes in the elections; 6). how do local voters spend the money they receive from vote buyers; and 7). how can vote buying be addressed to initiate electoral reforms?

Nuances of Elections

Elections, as sites of political participation, are supposed to be exercises of rational choice. This view assumes that people participate through the ballot on the basis of rational principles such as 'democracy', party programs, efficiency, constitutional agenda – all of which try to affirm one's membership in and identification with a rational and modern state (Alejo, et al, 1996).

But elections in Malanoy ceased to be as such. To a certain extent, logical reasoning, understanding and appreciation of political agenda, competence and commitment of local leaders were at some points subdued by the hues of money and the dispensation of favors by the candidate days before election day.

Politicians contend that the amount of money one needs to spend for each voter as 'inangayan' or 'palit' and the manner by which the funds are to be distributed would largely depend on a handful of uncontrolled variables – game plan of opponent, the required number of votes to win, one's game plan versus fund availability, channel selection and distribution plan among others. They also revealed that in most cases, they use marking of ballots and post election evaluation as primary strategies to ensure that the

money they spent, that they said come from their wallets and from donations, are not put to waste.

Voters, on the other hand, opined that they do not really sell their votes and that they do not really demand from candidates how much they would like to receive. The manner by which favors are dispensed days before or on election day generally depends on the candidate's generosity and not on the demands of the voter. Whatever they receive, they accept, especially those who poignantly are in need of the funds for daily sustenance.

While it may be said that generally, perceptions of people regarding the acceptability of the practice differ largely across educational backgrounds, economic class, age and sense of economic power as indicated by the presence or absence of jobs, and that somehow both the candidate and the voter have ways of rationalizing the practice, there is a growing tendency for the candidates and the voters of Malanoy to legitimize vote buying as a natural phenomenon on election day, and its normalcy precludes a certain sense of acceptability.

Both voters and politicians contend the moral dilemma, if ever there is, regarding vote-buying only comes on election day and because there is hardly any difference regarding the manner by which their political involvement change after the elections, with or without vote buying, the issue does not stand ground. After elections, things go back to normal and in the experience of most voters of Malanoy, the times at which they get to be affected by the affairs of government are minimal, and the situations by which they can have any effect on the realm of governance are rare.

It is pretty obvious that the prerequisite consideration of candidates regarding vote buying is how much they need to win and how they will be able to source it. Conversely, it is also very clear that majority of the voter's concern regarding vote-buying revolves around the issue of how much they receive and from whom they receive it. The consequential dimension of the issue surfaces only after a candidate already has the money to dispense and the voter already receives the money given.

The survey revealed that more candidates (53%) believed that the practice could be stopped as compared to those who don't (42%) while the rest (5%) are still undecided. For those who said that it could be stopped, they suggested strict enforcement of the law as the primary means to employ to stop the practice. They said that while there is the law that prohibits vote buying, government failed to implement it.

Voters, on the other hand, were asked the same question, as to whether or not there is still a possibility that vote buying will be stopped in the next coming elections. The survey revealed frustrating results. Majority (60.5%) of the voters believed that it is already impossible to stop vote buying during the elections, as compared to the few (35%) who said that it could be done.

Majority (59.8%) of those who said that it is impossible to stop buying opined that such is so because the people of their town are already used to it and that normally, people

expect to receive money on election day. On the other hand, those who said that vote buying could still be stopped said that it could be done if candidates will not give (24.3%), if people will unite to refuse vote buying money (13%), and if the government will strictly implement the law (10%).

As a summary, there are two emerging patterns that can help temper vote buying, not only in Malanoy, but in other localities as well. First, it is on the will of the candidate and that of the voter to refuse to give and accept money that the solution to the problem largely rests. The voter must not accept. The candidate must not give. But further, it must be made sure that all voters must not accept, and all candidates must not give. Absent the condition “all”, vote buying will still perpetuate itself, with less effort.

Applying the well-established principles of economics regarding supply and demand, we may say that if the demand for vote buying is high (voters will likely receive), then the suppliers will compete to meet the demand (candidates will likely give). If you curb the demand (voters start to refuse), then you will have the consequent effect of supply decline (candidates will start to stop giving money). However, we have to note that even in this clearly defined economic principle, there are still some exceptions – that even if demand is already low (voters will already refuse), the suppliers can still persist to produce the goods (candidates will continue to give).

This would entail the fact that the candidate must not have the resources, and the voter must not have a need for them. For if candidates have the resources, they can still give and if the voters still have a need for the money, they will still be tempted to receive. But this very simplistic view will find no ground in the current context of Malanoy. Majority of the candidates are well off (thus, they can give) and majority of the voters are poor (thus, they will likely receive).

To provide the equilibrium to this dilemma, the second pattern has to be put into place – the strict enforcement of the law. While there is the law that prohibits vote buying and vote selling, it still has to find its teeth in its administrative and judicial implementation. If candidates have the resources, the law implementers must make sure that the candidates can not make use of this resource to achieve political ends through vote-buying. On the other hand, if voters have the need for the resources, the law implementers must make sure that they are precluded from receiving such.

It is an imperative therefore that the problem must be approached at both angles. Preventing candidates from making use of their money to buy votes without precluding voters from receiving the favors will not solve the problem. In like manner, to prevent the voter from accepting anything from the candidate, without preventing the candidate from dispensing favors will also prove a failure. Both the voter’s desire to satisfy a need, and the candidate’s desire to win with his money, must be ably tempered by the implementers of the law.

The following recommendations are highlighted:

1. A relevant, formative and sustained voter's education program must be developed. By relevant, we mean that the program must be taught as seen from the perspective of the learner, and not from the perspective of the program handler. By formative, we mean that the program must consciously work towards shifting paradigms and changing behaviors not only of the current voters, more than just cultivating awareness and disseminating information. By sustained, we propose a program that does not only happen during election time, and does not only serve current voters (it may be too late already) but future voters as well.

2. Government instrumentalities – the Department of Interior and Local Government, the Philippine National Police and the local Commission on Election office and other agencies in interest– will have to devise the means by which the full force of the Omnibus Election Code can be translated into the local context. While it is admitted that the researcher is at a loss on how government can put more teeth into the law, it is suggested that a thought process in this respect be initiated.

3. Implement Republic Act No. 8436, known as “An Act Authorizing the Commission on Elections to Use an Automated Election System in the May 11, 1998 National Or Local Elections and in Subsequent National and Local Electoral Exercises, Providing Funds Therefor and For Other Purposes”. The implementation of the law was shelved due to a lot of hindering factors that may be true or fabricated as alleged by a lot of political analysts. This time, the government might want to pursue the implementation of the law and assess its potency especially that initial expenses were incurred by the government and computers were already dispatched to municipal offices.

While it may seem that the measures discussed here are the oldest prescriptions to the problems of our country by applying a certain degree of caution (education) and restraint (law enforcement), it is just an indication that after all the things that were already undertaken, not much has been done.

While this study may generate varied reactions from different sectors of society, pleasant and unpleasant, positive or negative, it is hoped that these reactions will propel more interesting discussions on the topic. In an attempt to characterize the economic context of vote buying, it is inevitable to tread on topics bordering on the lines of sociology, philosophy and political science, for man is not only an economic being but more. Thus, it is hoped also that this study will give birth to more studies on vote buying in other comprehensive and diverse disciplines to shed light on the things that still can be done now for local communities to recover from what can be considered a prevailing sickness.