



## The limits of 'one person, one vote' in the age of disillusionment and anti-politics: Experiences from the Philippines and Indonesia

Kay Conales\*

**Abstract:** The context and dynamics of suffrage and the overall ability of citizens to claim their rights have changed. Inequality, which the COVID-19 pandemic magnified, and extreme polarisation deter citizens from meaningful participation. A rights-based approach to address these problems is imperative.

*Suffrage*, or the right to vote, is the most basic and indispensable element of any working democracy. This key political right allows individuals to explicitly participate in politics. Given that human rights are interconnected, the right to vote is particularly crucial because it enables individuals to legitimately claim their much broader thread of rights—from social, economic, and cultural rights to civil liberties.

The saying '*one person, one vote*' encapsulates how every vote counts, and how every vote matters. However, the right to vote is faced with many challenges

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\*Kay Conales is a student in the Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation in Asia Pacific ([APMA](#)) at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University. She also studied at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIPOL) of Universitas Gadjah Mada for the second semester. Her main research interests concern political rights and civil society dynamics.

such as vote-buying. This phenomenon is mostly [explained](#) through the lens of clientelism or patronage politics, postulating how dyadic and personalistic ties involve the exchange of goods and services, and therefore reduce the genuineness of votes. This analysis hinges on an actor-centred or agential assumption that individuals simply decide to sell their votes [or not vote at all] by weighing costs and benefits. Nevertheless, the reality is not always this straightforward.

I contend that individuals' appreciation of their right to vote is largely dependent on the systemic factors that either prescribe or proscribe fruitful and meaningful participation. It is not merely a calculated [rational] choice, but a choice informed by context. In the age of [disillusionment](#) and [anti-politics](#), the right to vote is severely threatened in such a way that responsible voting is much easier to discount. Vote-buying has been [defined](#) as the offer of inducements to voters, usually financial or material, made by candidates or political parties during elections, in exchange for the former's electoral support. It is illegal in many countries, including Indonesia and the Philippines. Despite the existence of laws that define and penalise such acts, vote-buying persists and is endemic in any election. However, because it is illicit, it is usually difficult to ascertain the actual number of cases. In [Indonesia](#), at least a third of the voting population has experienced being bribed for their votes. A significant chunk of the voting population in the [Philippines](#) also expressed certainty about vote-buying happening in the country.

Vote-buying is widely considered an [election strategy](#), whether targeted at loyal, 'core voters' or used to sway swing, uncommitted ones. The ubiquity of 'money politics' has fundamentally altered the dynamics and impact of suffrage and political participation. If votes are impelled by sheer money, of what value is '*one person, one vote*'?

Essentially, vote-buying erodes the intrinsic value of suffrage, disrupting not only political rights but also all other rights such as the rights to a decent standard of living, education, work, social services, and health. It is important to remember that the capacity of the state, which is the primary duty-bearer in protecting and promoting the human rights enshrined in the treaties that it has ratified, rests on the receptiveness and willingness of actual power holders. If state leaders were elected into office through fraudulent means, how can we expect them to act with integrity and human rights in mind?

### **A focus on Indonesia and the Philippines**

Being 'new democracies', Indonesia and the Philippines introduced many institutional reforms (e.g., a multiparty system) that are meant to democratise political competition. Nonetheless, because of institutional weaknesses, these boomeranged and, instead, only constricted the access to and exercise of power. This echoes the [argument](#) that vote-buying is not simply a personal decision, but

it is propelled by the conditions and demands set out by institutions and structures.

There are initiatives from governments and civil society that seek to address vote-buying. In Indonesia, [Democracy Volunteer \(Relawan Demokrasi\)](#) is a voter education program aimed at increasing political participation and election quality. The [Komisi Pemilihan Umum](#) also conducts roadshows in schools to talk about elections. In the Philippines, the [Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting \(PPCRV\)](#), a non-profit organisation, has served as the 'citizens' arm' of the Commission on Elections. The organisation also has local counterparts that conduct learning sessions about elections in urban and rural communities. The most common interventions in Indonesia and the Philippines against vote-buying include: (a) penalising the act; (b) introducing limits and monitoring mechanisms on campaign activities and expenditures; (c) promoting political education; (d) institutionalising electoral reforms especially aimed at improving the quality of political parties; and (e) strengthening accountability mechanisms and networks, especially through civil society. These measures involve a wide range of actors and institutions and entail significant resources.

Even with these serious efforts, why does vote-buying remain prevalent in these supposed democracies? I highlight two compounding realities in such context, namely inequality and toxic polarisation, which further alienate the citizens from their right to vote. Not only are individuals more prone to sell their votes, but they are also more likely unmotivated to exercise their political rights altogether. Notwithstanding evidence of economic growth, the wealth gap between the rich and the poor in Indonesia and the Philippines has intensified over the last two decades. Data from the World Bank show that even with Indonesia's [stable Gini coefficient](#) trend, the numbers still indicate high levels of inequality where wealth is concentrated in a small percentage of the population. On the other hand, the Philippines' [Gini coefficient](#) was at 0.44 in 2018, which is higher than the global threshold of 0.4. The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has also aggravated existing inequalities and disproportionately affected large segments of the population, especially informal workers, the urban poor, and other vulnerable sectors of society. These groups are also most [prone](#) to political exploitation and corruption, which impede them from purposeful participation.

The last decade has also shown toxic polarisation. In the recent election cycles, the divide between [Islamists and pluralists](#) has emerged in Indonesia. The dichotomous narrative propagated by Duterte's [negative-other presentation](#) has caused an impasse in public discourse in the Philippines. This is exacerbated by the rise of [disinformation networks](#) and algorithm politics where certain views and 'truths' are disseminated and legitimised to elicit specific responses and attitudes from the public. Disinformation is often utilised to undermine the credibility of media and state institutions and [degrade public trust](#) in general. It is also used to inflate social division and inculcate resentment and fear. The public

can be exposed to political information that cements the belief that political participation never translates to political change.

### **Further remarks on citizens' attitudes towards politics**

If not totally detached, citizens feel dubious about politics and governance, specifically the electoral process. The struggle to meet their economic needs may hinder them from engaging in other productive activities, leading them to dichotomise their personal responsibilities from their roles in public life.

Extreme polarisation could also evoke negative attitudes that distance citizens from politics. It could also entice citizens to subscribe to problematic views, condoning vote-buying for instance, simply because it is widely practised.

As much as inequality and polarisation can instigate political action, they can also dissuade individuals from political participation. Overall, individual citizens are situated in an incredibly detrimental setting that does not encourage them to take greater responsibility and action.

The belief in '*one person, one vote*' is contested by this state of disillusionment and anti-politics. How can we solve vote-buying in particular and reinvigorate meaningful political participation in general?

### **Lessons to be considered**

Reflecting on our experiences, important lessons can be drawn from existing policies and courses of action against vote-buying. First, institutionalising a legal framework that penalises electoral corruption has proven to be insufficient.

Second, in conceptualising reforms, externalities need to be considered. Third, initiatives have to be context-sensitive and context-specific.

Aside from securing a suitable enabling environment for political participation, a rights-based framework in political education presents a good opportunity for academia, civil society, and media. Addressing vote-buying and other challenges to political participation demands a whole-of-society approach. Fundamental to this is a long-term educational process that instils not only knowledge but values and attitudes that are consistent with human rights and democracy. This process could be embedded in school curricula and reinforced in community-based or civil society fora. The methods to be used can be tailored according to the context and its audience.

The restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic and the 'new normal' also need to be taken into account. As highlighted by Marystella Auma Simiyu in relation to African countries, digital models and other ICT materials must be [developed](#) to augment offline interactions in Asian countries as well as in any other.

### **A rights-based approach in addressing vote-buying**

Citizens must not only be taught the technicalities of suffrage and the [electoral process](#). Instead, citizens need to gain an understanding of the roles and responsibilities they hold beyond elections and the larger context and demands

of their citizenship. Political education must not only be oriented toward the tangible activities and processes attached to suffrage; it must be geared towards greater social consciousness.

Human rights can be particularly relevant here. The interdependence of human rights allows for a better appreciation of the essence of suffrage and political participation. The rights-based approach places people's rights at the centre of policies and practices. In this regard, political education and participation should espouse the [PANEL principles](#) of participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment, and legality

*Participation* tells us that politics requires the engagement of the public. Participation must be proactive and meaningful. Its requisite is access to credible information on various issues and concerns. A caveat must be made in view of the influx of fake news and disinformation. This entails that knowledge products and sources are more responsive to context, creative, and engaging. This needs the collaboration of academia for their content expertise, civil society for their acumen in organisation and mobilisation, and media for their mastery of communication strategies and tools.

*Accountability* in the context of political education is directed toward duty-bearers and rights-holders. In the exercise of their political rights, citizens must have a sense of ownership so they are pushed to be more conscientious and deliberate with their choices and decisions. Accountability among citizens would create more incentive and pressure for duty-bearers to be careful in their decisions.

*Non-discrimination* necessitates inclusiveness. Political education must consider the interests of various sectors, especially the marginalised, and not only focus on dominant groups.

The aforementioned principles also provide substantive guidance in crafting laws and regulations that define and penalise vote-buying and other electoral offences. In the process of making [or reviewing] laws, the perspectives of different stakeholders and parties need to be articulated to bring about more effective and robust solutions.

*Empowerment* is at the core of political education. Citizens must be capacitated to engage in politics, demand accountability from politicians, and criticise and recommend policies.

*Legality* in political education allows citizens to learn about and maximise the spaces and avenues where they can claim their rights. Understanding the pertinent legal frameworks governing rights and citizenship is helpful in

determining what can be done within and beyond existing institutions and in calling for change where necessary.

Political education that utilises human rights as its framework has the prospect of being more comprehensive and genuinely empowering. However, this requires the collaboration of many stakeholders outside the state. At a time when 'truths' are fabricated and disputed for the vested interests of a few, it is vital for these networks of actors and institutions to hold the line and keep public discourse as constructive and deliberative. These networks prove to be pivotal in closing the gap between citizens and their citizenship, in bringing politics back to the *demos*, and in restoring the power of collective action for social and political change. After all, the saying '*one person, one vote*' cannot evoke its usefulness nor its verity, if the citizens casting that ballot do not recognise the true power they hold. Political education rooted in human rights can help make citizens realise that power