

Clean Elections and the Great Unwashed
Vote Buying and Voter Education in the Philippines

Frederic Charles Schaffer

The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

Frederic Schaffer is Research Associate at the Center for International Studies at M. I. T. He was a Member in the year 2003-04, when the School's focus had turned to bio-medical ethics. But Schaffer's work harkened back to questions of corruption. His research focuses primarily on the impact of local cultures on the operation of electoral institutions, with a geographic focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. What sets his work apart from other studies of electoral democracy is a methodological focus on language: by investigating carefully the differing ways in which ordinary people use terms such as "democracy," "vote," and "politics," Schaffer arrives at a fuller appreciation of how people understand and make use of electoral institutions. This attentiveness to language lies at the theoretical center of his book, *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (Cornell University Press, 1998), a finalist for the African Studies Association Herskovitz Award for best scholarly work on Africa. His current research, from which this Occasional Paper is drawn, uses similar ordinary language techniques to study "dirty" electoral practices in the Philippines. Schaffer conducted or supervised hundreds of interviews in the Tagalog language with ordinary voters, over a period of four years, to understand how they view candidates, electoral campaigns, vote buying, and civic education. That interview data has been integrated into a book, *Democracy at Risk: The Hidden Costs of Clean Election Reform*, whose central argument is that efforts to clean up elections sometimes undermine the very principles of democratic fairness that these efforts are intended to promote. In addition to the Philippines, cases discussed in the book include Taiwan, Thailand, and South Africa. The book, under contract at Cornell University Press, will be completed by the summer of 2005. Schaffer is also editing a volume that looks exclusively at the phenomenon of vote-buying. Titled *Democracy for Sale: The Causes, Consequences, and Reform of Vote Buying*, the book offers the first systematic, comparative analysis of this widespread but ill-understood practice.

Clean Elections and the Great Unwashed: Vote Buying and Voter Education in the Philippines

The paper that I present today is drawn from a book that I am finishing on the hidden costs of clean election reform. I will focus my remarks on vote buying and voter education in the Philippines; but the larger work takes up the “iatrogenic” effects of clean election reform: how attempts to clean up dirty electoral practices may do damage to the very principles of democratic fairness that these efforts are intended to promote. In Greek, *iatros* means “doctor” and *genic* means “produced by;” an iatrogenic illness is a treatment induced illness. This is exactly what I am studying in the realm of electoral politics.

How does this analogy work? If we call *illnesses* dirty electoral practices, such as vote buying, intimidation, double voting, or registration fraud, and *treatment* clean election reforms such as the secret ballot, new forms of identification, tighter registration rules, and improved voting technologies, then *treatment induced illnesses* are various forms of damage to democracy. These most notably take the form of voter alienation, demobilization, and disenfranchisement.

To give you a sense of how clean election reforms sometimes produce these illnesses, I have drawn out the analogy to suggest four iatrogenic mechanisms.

The first is *legal disenfranchisement*. This is brought about by the imposition of a new uniform legal requirement, in the name of clean elections, upon people who differ in their dispositions or abilities to comply with that requirement out of shame, indifference, or political conviction, among other reasons. For example, in South Africa, the ANC-dominated parliament decided, in 1998, to require a certain kind of ID for voter registration. Because of historical memories and/or the residua of racism, blacks chose to obtain this particular form of identification at a much higher rate than did whites. In the end, the registration rate for whites was substantially lower than for blacks.

The second is *administrative exclusion*. Here, election officials enforce clean election rules unevenly, apply them falteringly, or subvert them altogether in ways that result in disenfranchisement. This occurred, for instance, in the Philippines after the adoption of tighter voter registration procedures in the late 1990s. The failure of election officials to inform voters of the new procedures and corresponding deadlines resulted in the disenfranchisement, in 2001, of an estimated 3 to 6 million people.

The third mechanism is one I call *partisan demobilization*. This takes place when candidates and their operatives, reacting to clean election reforms, alter their mobilization strategies in ways that keep people away from the polls. For instance, electoral agents might begin to pay people not to vote. This sometimes happens when clean election reforms strengthen vote secrecy, thus making it difficult for vote buyers to monitor whether vote sellers are in fact voting as they were paid to do. This situation occurred in rural New York when the secret ballot was introduced in the 1890s. We can observe something similar happening today in Guyana and Zambia, among other places.

Finally there is *disciplinary reaction*. Here, clean election reformers attempt to impose standards of moral or correct electoral conduct on voters who do not share the same standards of morality or correctness. Often, the effect is either to reinforce behaviors the reformers seek to change, or to estrange from the electoral process those voters singled out for reform. The latter

is what happened in the Philippines when upper class reformers attempted to reduce vote buying through a public education campaign targeting the poor in 2001. I will have more to say about this mechanism and this case a little further on. But before I start on that, I would like to sketch four questions that my book will anticipate about these mechanisms.

First, why four mechanisms? The quick answer is that the four mechanisms match up with the four main actors involved in clean election reform: legal disfranchisement is set in motion by lawmakers (who craft the new rules); administrative exclusion is set in motion by election officials (who implement them); partisan demobilization is set in motion by candidates and their operatives (who play by them); disciplinary reaction is set in motion by civic educators (who teach the public new ways to behave). The mechanisms are, in short, representative of what can go wrong in each major phase or domain of clean election reform.

The second question: is the damage done to democracy by these mechanisms intentional, or is it an unplanned consequence of well-intentioned reform? The short answer is both. Because clean election reforms are often complex and difficult to implement, and because candidates, operatives, and voters often respond to reforms in unanticipated ways, well-intentioned measures often produce harm—especially when the new measures are inherently restrictive. But not all harm is an unintended by-product of benign reform (in spite of how the reforms may be presented in public). Because reform is often partisan, measures have been crafted, implemented, or responded to in ways that intentionally disfranchise or demobilize select groups of voters. In places like South Africa, elections were “fixed” in both senses of the word—they were both repaired and manipulated.

The third, but perhaps most basic, question is: why is all this important to study? Let me just say here that when we ask how democratic an electoral system is, we tend to think first of big constitutional or representational questions: who is allowed to vote, how votes are translated into seats, the relative merits of a parliamentary versus a presidential system, and the like. Most of us have not, at least until Florida 2000, thought enough about the nitty-gritty of carrying out elections—about how the registry is prepared, what documents voters must present, how voters cast their ballots, and how ballots are counted. But how polling is conducted, or reformed, can also have important ramifications for the quality of democracy, sometimes in non-obvious or paradoxical ways. It is on the reform of this oft overlooked but indispensable part of the electoral exercise that the book focuses.

Finally the fourth question: is this examination of iatrogenic harm an argument against cleaning up elections? The answer is an emphatic “no.” To acknowledge that clean election reforms sometimes inflict damage should not be taken as an argument that such reforms should simply be abandoned. Fraud and manipulation often take serious proportions, and can themselves compromise the quality of democracy. Most obviously they can override the will of the electorate. In the Philippines, an estimated two million spurious entries plagued the voters’ list in the 1995 elections, and the vote padding which this allowed cost at least one senatorial candidate his seat. Fraud and manipulation can also alienate voters and thereby depress voter turnout. In Mexico, for instance, a 1991 public opinion survey found that 59% of the respondents “said that they believed that many people did not vote in elections because the elections were not perceived to be honest or clean” (Dominguez and McCann, 1996: 159). Widespread fraud and manipulation also make it less likely that losers will accept electoral outcomes, or the democratic rules of the game, as legitimate. This loss of legitimacy may well undermine the credibility of elections and weaken people’s commitment to the democratic process.

It would thus be a mistake to frame the issue too narrowly as a choice between elections that are “clean but exclusionary” on the one hand or “dirty but inclusive” on the other. Both disfranchisement and manipulation depreciate the quality of democracy. The real goal should be to

make elections both clean and inclusive as possible. For this reason, it is important to understand how and why clean election reforms sometimes go bad. Such information will hopefully aid legislators and election officials, or the activists in civil society who watch over them, find ways to achieve both goals simultaneously. While I do not believe that the “reform of reform” is simple or straightforward, to the extent that iatrogenic harm is preventable, those of us with a commitment to clean and inclusive democracy should try to prevent it. When there are unescapable trade-offs we should, as at minimum, be aware of what has been traded away.

So, now to a more detailed discussion of one of the iatrogenic mechanisms: disciplinary reaction.

Disciplinary Reaction

Election watchdog groups, public-minded corporations, government election bodies, reformist political parties, and other civic educators sometimes try to clean up dirty electoral practices by teaching ordinary voters to change their behavior. The goal of this education, typically, is to convince people to obey existing election laws, whether it be to vote secretly, to refrain from selling their votes, or to resist the temptation of voting more than once.

To the extent that civic educators wish to train voters to act “correctly,” their efforts have a disciplinary component. This reality suggests a need to understand how people who are the target of educational reform experience and react to these disciplinary efforts. Whether voters spurn, absorb, ignore, or misunderstand specific educational messages will have significant implications not only for the effectiveness of the education campaign, but also for the quality of the resulting democracy.

Rarely has civic education been studied as a disciplinary project, so empirical data on such reactions are scarce. For the book, it was thus necessary to gather evidence on the ground. Among reforming democracies, the Philippines stood out as a promising research site since civic education is a major component of clean election reform there. This paper, then, examines in some depth the case of the Philippines, drawing on mass surveys as well as open-ended interviews I conducted or supervised with ordinary voters, politicians, civic educators, and advertising executives. Before turning to this analysis, however, a few words are in order to put the Philippine experience in its proper comparative context.

Education Campaigns Around the World

Among the behaviors that civic educators around the world single out for reform, vote buying appears to be the most common, perhaps because educators believe it to be particularly amenable to change, and perhaps too because it is so widespread. Credible reports of vote buying have come from all regions of the globe, and in many countries the scale of this practice has been massive. In the Philippines, an estimated three million people nationwide were offered some form of payment in the 2002 *barangay* (community level) elections—about seven percent of all voting aged adults (Social Weather Stations 2002). In Thailand, thirty percent of household heads surveyed in a national sample said that they were offered money during the 1996 general election (Pasuk et al. 2000). In Taiwan’s third largest city, Taichung, and its surrounding county, twenty-seven percent of a random sample of eligible voters reported in 1999 that they accepted cash during electoral campaigns past (Cheng, Wang, and Chen 2000). In the Armenian city of Yerevan, seventy-five percent of a random sample of citizens reported that an electoral bribe had been offered to them, their friends, or their relatives during the 2003 parliamentary elections (Transparency International Armenia 2003). In Brazil, an estimated six million people nation-

wide were offered money for their votes in the 2000 municipal elections, about six percent of all voting aged adults (Speck and Abramo 2001). In Mexico, a national post-election survey found that about fifteen percent of respondents reported receiving from a party either a gift or assistance (Cornelius 2004, 50-52). While these numbers—all derived from mass surveys—must be treated with care, they do provide a conservative, if rough, gauge of just how widespread the practice is in certain countries.

In trying to convince voters to refrain from selling their votes, many civic educators have kept the message simple and palatable: accept the money, but vote your conscience. In Bulgaria, the party representing the Roma told their supporters to “eat their meatballs, but vote with your heart.” Civil society groups in Zambia urged voters to “eat widely but vote wisely.” Jaime Cardinal Sin, Archbishop of Manila during the twilight years of Marcos, advised voters to “take the bait but not the hook.”

Other civic educators have taken other tacks, perhaps realizing that this kind of message may encourage more voters to ask for money. Prior to the 1989 election, reformers in Taiwan produced stickers with the message “my family doesn’t sell votes,” and asked voters to display them on their houses. In Brazil, the slogan of a national ad campaign was “votes don’t have a price, they have consequences.” In Mexico, Roman Catholic bishops distributed pamphlets informing parishioners that “your vote is free. . .it cannot be bought or sold.” Radio spots broadcast in Guinea told voters “your voice is sacred, so no materials goods should influence your choice.” Civic educators in South Africa advised: “do not vote for a party which offers money or food for exchange for your vote. One who tries this is corrupt.”

How have voters responded to these educational campaigns? Empirical data are scattered and thin, but what we do know is not encouraging. A researcher in Taiwan discovered that not everyone reacted to the “my family doesn’t sell votes” sticker as civic educators there had anticipated:

In 1991, I interviewed an opposition party activist in a southern Taiwanese village who said she wouldn’t dream of using the sticker, which she found embarrassingly self-righteous. She gave me the sticker as an example of how out of touch activists in Taipei were with conditions in the countryside (Rigger 2002, 5).

In Thailand, voter education campaigns also produced unintended consequences. During the 1995 election, for instance, public service ads inspired the very behaviors they were trying to discourage—in schoolchildren no less. One observer explained:

To promote the elections, mock polls were organized in many schools. But in one primary school there were unexpected results: “one team bribed the others with candy, while another straightforwardly stuffed papers with their candidate numbers into the hands of younger pupils.” This was not seen as a natural thing for Thais to do. Rather, as the assistant principal told the press, it was the product of modern media culture: “They did not know they were doing anything wrong. They saw anti-vote-buying advertisements on TV but did not get the whole message. They thought bribery might help them win, so here we got plenty of candy today” (Callahan 2000, 133).

Children were not the only ones to draw the “wrong” lesson from voter education campaigns. A network of Thai election monitoring organizations hosted a series of educational forums in Chiang Mai province in 1999, with funding provided by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. A primary goal of the forums was to teach voters not to sell their votes.

After interviewing some 1,700 attendees, evaluators found that, perversely, “there was a slight increase after the forum in the number of participants who believed that it was wrong to sell their votes and not vote for the buyer” (Thornton 2000, 29). In other words, the forums (like the anti vote buying ads to which the school children were exposed) reinforced or produced the very beliefs they were designed to dispel.

During the lead up to the 2001 elections in the Philippines, pollwatching groups like the National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel) and the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (Ppcrv) sponsored a variety of radio, television, and newspaper public service ads on the evils of vote-buying. They also distributed flyers, pamphlets, and posters; several corporations placed their own newspaper ads. One Namfrel handout challenged voters: “Ask yourself, why is the candidate treating your vote as a commodity or an item in a *sari sari* [corner convenience] store?” A Namfrel newspaper ad reminded voters that: “Your vote is valuable. It does not have a price.” Still another asked “Do you love the country or the money?” A full-page newspaper ad placed by 3M Innovation (the maker of post-its) told voters: “Don’t be blinded by money. Vote with your conscience.” Another newspaper ad paid for by Red Horse Beer warned voters that “A little pocket change won’t put you ahead. Don’t get bribed. Vote for the right candidate.” Pagbabago@Pilipinas—a group of artists, educators, businessmen, and professionals dedicated to social reform—distributed a song through Namfrel and parish offices called “You Can’t Buy Me” (*Hindi Mo Ako Mabibili*). The song contained the following lyrics: “You can’t buy me. I won’t make that mistake again. You think because I’m poor, you can fool me. . .What do you think, I don’t have self-respect? No, you can’t buy me.”

To gauge the effectiveness of this kind of advertising, I put together a team of interviewers. We showed three print ads to 160 randomly selected voters in five communities around the country where vote buying is common.¹ Only fourteen percent of the respondents, we found, thought that someone in “a community like theirs” would change his or her mind about accepting money from a candidate upon seeing the Namfrel “your vote is valuable” ad, twenty-two percent upon seeing the Red Horse Beer “pocket change” ad, and twenty-nine percent upon seeing the 3M “blinded my money” ad. The ads, furthermore, elicited strong negative reactions among many respondents, making nearly one in five feel, in their words, “manipulated,” “humiliated,” “insulted,” or the like. Also worth noting is that a number of respondents thought that some of the ads would encourage, not dissuade, people from selling their votes. Typical is the reaction of the farmer who remarked that “this ad says not to accept pocket change, so it means: go for the highest bidder!”

When we asked another fifty-four voters in Metro Manila (including twenty-four who had accepted money) whether seeing the ads would have had an effect on *their own* behavior, only one man said that seeing these ads would have changed his mind about taking money (but not about his choice of candidates). In addition to the Namfrel “your vote is valuable,” the Red Horse Beer “pocket change,” and 3M “don’t be blinded by money” ads, interviewees were asked to comment on the Namfrel “do you love the country?” ad. [See illustrations 1 through 4.] All others responded that the ads would have had no effect whatsoever. Indeed nineteen of the fifty-four people (35%) had seen one or more of these ads during the 2001 election campaign, and reported that the ads did not influence their choices at that time. Just as significantly, one of every five voters—and one of every three voters who did not accept any money—were downright offended by the ads, calling them “hurtful” or “insulting.” “They think I can be bought for pocket change?” snapped one indignant retiree, “don’t they know I wouldn’t accept even a large sum of money?”

Anti-vote buying education campaigns, as far as we can tell, have not proven to be tremendously effective in either the Philippines or Thailand, nor is the anecdotal evidence from Taiwan

Ang iyong boto ay mahalaga.
Hindi may halaga.



Ang sukat ng iyong pagkatao'y
hindi matutumbasan ng kuwarta.

Kaya ngayong halalan,
'wag ibenta ang iyong pagkatao.
'Wag ibenta ang iyong boto.



A public service message brought to you by Namfrel, the Advertising Board of the Philippines, and this publication.

Illustration 1: Namfrel Public Service Ad, May 2001. "Your vote is valuable, it doesn't have a price. Your character is priceless. So, in this election, don't sell your character, don't sell you vote.



Illustration 3: 3M public service ad, May 2001. “Don’t be blinded by money. Vote with your conscience.”

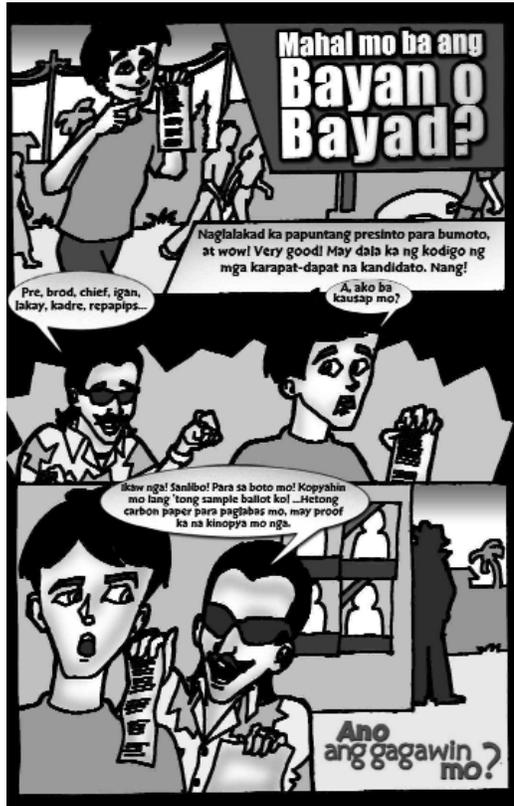


Illustration 4: Namfrel public service ad, May 2001. “Do you love the country or the money? You’re walking to your precinct to vote, and wow, very good, you’ve brought a list of worthy candidates when... Vote buyer: ‘hey buddy, brother, friend, chief, etc.’ Voter: ‘What? You talking to me?’ Vote buyer: ‘Yeah you. 1000 pesos for your vote. Just copy this sample ballot. Here’s carbon paper so that when you come out you have proof that you copied it.’ What will you do?”

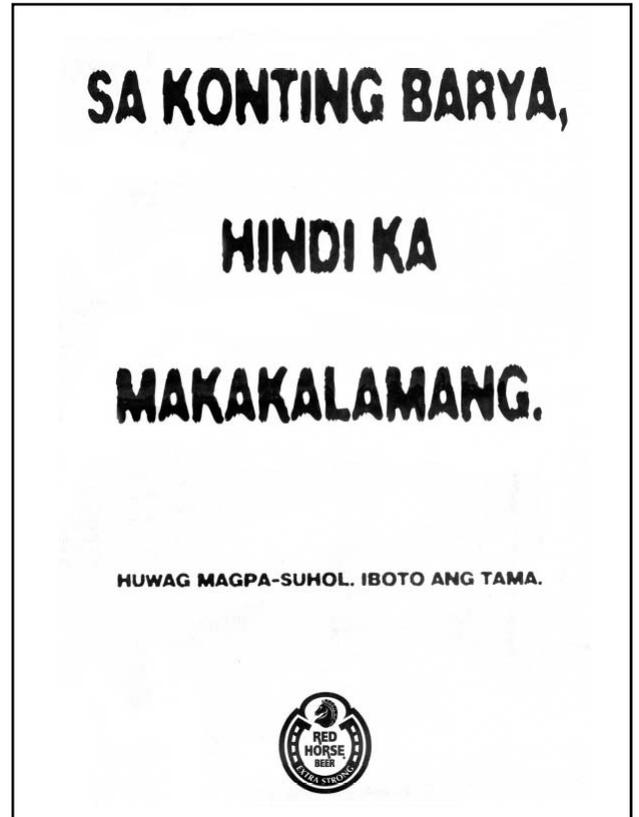


Illustration 2: Red Horse Beer public service ad, May 2001. “A little pocket change won’t put you ahead. Don’t ask for a bribe. Vote for a good candidate.”

auspicious. The rest of this paper will explore (some) reasons why education campaigns have not only failed, but in some ways made things worse. It focuses on the Philippines where, unlike Taiwan or Thailand, voter education has been the cornerstone of efforts to curb vote buying.²

To preview the argument, this paper makes the case that it is in part the upper class character of the civic education movement in the Philippines that has both hamstrung efforts to convince poor voters to stop selling their votes, and alienated many of these voters. In a word, civic education campaigns present an upper and middle class view of vote buying that does not match up well with how the poor themselves experience it.

These differences in how the higher and lower classes view vote buying are embedded within larger differences between how rich and poor see each other and their respective roles in democratic politics. To understand how class affects the effectiveness of civic education, it is thus necessary to first examine these broader differences. We will thus turn our attention now to class categories in the Philippines, and to how both the well-off and the poor (at least how a random sample of people in one urban poor community) view the current state of Philippine democracy.

Class in the Philippines

Because class is a key category for this analysis, a few words on its meaning in the Philippine context, and its relation to civic education, are in order. Class distinctions are important and real to most Filipinos, though precise class boundaries are hard to delimit. There is a longstanding debate among academicians about the structural attributes of “the middle class” or “the bourgeoisie.” Opinion pollsters and market researchers distinguish five classes: A (very rich), B (moderately rich), C (middle class), D (moderately poor), and E (very poor). Estimates of the class composition of the Philippines using this schema vary somewhat. Depending on the survey, classes A, B, and C—the middle and upper classes—together make up between seven and eleven percent of the population, class D between fifty-eight and seventy-three percent, and class E between eighteen and thirty-two percent.

The use of these lettered categories has, notably, spread beyond the polling and marketing industries. Journalists writing for the daily papers regularly talk about the “ABC crowd.” People in urban centers sometimes also use these categories to designate themselves and others. Residents of Metro Manila (the city of Manila itself plus surrounding cities and towns) are familiar enough with these categories that pollsters can ask interviewees to place themselves into one of them.

There are, of course, still other categories that ordinary Filipinos use to designate class. When speaking about wealth, speakers of Tagalog (the most widely spoken language in the country) sometimes distinguish “*mayayaman*” (the rich) from “*mahihirap*” (the poor). When speaking of politics and social order they might differentiate “*elitista*” (elites) from “*masa*” (masses). In the realm of taste or culture they differentiate those who are “*burgis*,” “*sosyal*,” or “*coño*” (from the upper class, but more broadly classy, smart, chic, snooty) from those who are “*bakya*” (literally wooden clog, but means poor, tacky, cheesy, old-fashioned) or “*jologs*” (crass, low class). These categories, to be sure, are not completely overlapping. Not everyone who is wealthy is a *coño* sophisticate. Not everyone who is poor has provincial *bakya* taste. It also noteworthy that an awareness of “middleness” is growing, no doubt as the number of managers, teachers, and other white collar workers has itself grown in the past few decades.

For the purposes of this analysis, the middle and upper classes—however loosely we must content ourselves with defining them—will be grouped together. For one, the number of people who belong to these classes is relatively small. Consequently, pollsters typically group the rich A

and B classes together with the middle C class when presenting their findings. The little quantitative data that is available thus does not often permit finer distinctions.

Another reason for grouping the middle and upper classes together is that civic educators tend to be drawn from both strata. Among the most active participants in election watchdog groups are middle class white collar workers, educators, and church leaders; upper class local capitalists and corporate managers who perceive their business interests to be damaged by the lack of transparency and accountability in government; and middle and upper class students who attend elite universities or private high schools.

The two most prominent voluntary organizations involved in cleaning up elections are Namfrel, which conducts a “quick” parallel vote count to deter and detect vote padding and other forms of “wholesale” cheating, and the Pprcv, which fields pollwatchers on election day to deter intimidation, vote buying, and other forms of “retail” malpractice. In the 2001 elections, Namfrel claims to have fielded more than 150,000 volunteers nationwide, while Pprcv reports that it had more than 450,000. Both organizations also engage in voter education.

While a wide array of civic associations and church groups—from the Women’s Action Network for Development to the National Council of Churches in the Philippines—belong to Namfrel, big business plays the leading role. The general secretary of Namfrel, Guillermo Luz, is also the executive director of the Makati Business Club, whose membership consists of CEOs and senior executives representing the largest corporations in the country. The national chairman of Namfrel, Jose Concepcion, Jr., is also chairman of the board of the Concepcion family-owned RFM Corporation, the country’s second largest food and beverage conglomerate. The national secretariat of Namfrel, tellingly, is located in the RFM corporate headquarters. The list of business and professional associations that have donated labor, money, and materials to Namfrel reads like a who’s who of the Philippine corporate world. Among them are the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Management Association of the Philippines, the Bankers Association of the Philippines, the Integrated Bar of the Philippines, and the Federation of Philippine Industries. Business and professional organizations have leadership roles in the organization’s most dynamic provincial chapters as well. As one observer noted, “‘free and fair elections’ is the new business of business” (Hedman 1998, 166; see also Hedman 1999).

As for the Pprcv, its origins can be traced to a small breakfast hosted by the Archbishop of Manila in 1991. Among the guests were Commission on Elections (Comelec) commissioner Haydee Yorac, and Henrietta de Villa, the National President of the Council of the Laity of the Philippines. As the conversation turned to the upcoming 1992 election, those present decided to initiate, in words attributed to Yorac, a “big organized systemic endeavor” to “repel the evil” of goons, guns, and gold (Bacani 1992, 40). The Pprcv was officially launched five months later by the Archdiocese of Manila, and it soon spread nationwide. While the seven member board of advisors are all bishops or archbishops, the Pprcv is a lay organization. The national chairman comes from the laity, as do most members of the national executive board. The Pprcv relies, furthermore, on the (lay) parish pastoral council of each parish to supply coordinators and volunteers.

The lay membership of the Pprcv is disproportionately middle class. As National Chairman de Villa (1992) noted in her first report to the Comelec, the “Pprcv attracted and tapped various types of laity, not just the usual “stockholders of the Church,” still, the involvement of the poor, as deduced from the data, was not clearly manifested.” The same concern—that “volunteers belong to the middle class, less from grassroots”—was echoed in a 1996 national conference report (Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting 1996).

If civic educators come mostly from the middle and upper classes, vote sellers are concentrated among the poor. According to one national survey, in the 2001 national and local

elections, eight percent of voting-aged adults in the ABC classes were offered money, nine percent of the D class, and seven percent of the E class. Though people in each of these three categories received offers in roughly the same proportion, there are far more people in the D and E classes, which together make up no less than eighty-nine percent of the population. Thus, in absolute numbers, many more poor people were offered money. The poor were also more likely than the better-off to accept what was offered: sixty-eight percent of class D respondents and seventy-five percent of class E respondents accepted against only thirty-eight percent of ABC respondents.³

Civic educators are concentrated in the middle and upper classes. Vote sellers are concentrated among the poor. Are there differences in how people on the two sides of this class divide view elections?

Philippine Democracy Viewed from Above

Many in the middle and upper classes, it might not be an overgeneralization to say, find elections to be a source of both frustration and anxiety. Election after election, politicians who they perceive to be inept, depraved, and/or corrupt are returned to power. Actors, entertainers, and sports heroes with little or no experience in politics routinely do well in the polls. In the 2001 elections, a child rapist serving a life term won a congressional seat, as did a candidate fighting extradition to the United States on charges of wire fraud, tax evasion, illegal campaign contributions, and conspiracy to defraud the government.

Consequently, many in the middle and upper classes are left with a feeling of electoral powerlessness. The ABC classes, when grouped together, make up no more than eleven percent of the electorate, which means they do not often decide electoral outcomes. Whoever wins the vote of the D and E classes wins, period. Such was the (successful) strategy of presidential candidate Joseph “Erap” Estrada, who ran in 1998 on the platform of “*Erap para sa mahirap*” (Erap for the poor). Winning thirty-eight percent of the class D vote and forty-eight percent of the class E vote, he was not hurt by weak support among ABC voters (only twenty-three percent cast their ballots for him). Going into the election, Estrada knew he did not need, and therefore did not court, their votes. Some ABC voters were reported to have said that they would leave the country if Estrada were to win. His reply, broadcast on national television, was an indifferent “they can start packing” (Laquian and Laquian 1998, 111). Even the politics of Makati City—financial center of the Philippines, and home of some of the poshest residential subdivisions in the county—is determined largely by the vote of the poor. When Makati’s elite opposed Mayor Jejomar Binay’s bid for reelection in 1995, he told them disdainfully: “you only compromise five percent of the people here, and when it comes to votes, yours don’t matter, we can even do without counting them” (Gloria 1995, 83). His assessment was correct, and he won.

Most politicians thus work hard, as Binay and Estrada did, to cultivate the poor vote. They sponsor community “projects” such as school building, street lighting, well digging, and drainage cleaning. They also provide more direct payoffs to voters by supplying potential supporters with food, money, free medical care, scholarships, discounted funerals, and the like. To protect this pool of votes, politicians also take measures to prevent the relocation of poor voters to areas outside of their bailiwicks. In Quezon City, for instance, a congressional representative tried to postpone the completion of a major roadway until after the election so that “his” squatters would not be resettled elsewhere.

Many in the middle and upper classes are troubled by the kind of patronage politics which results. They are also troubled by the pivotal role played by poor voters who allow themselves—in the words of one journalist—“to be herded, fed, and paid.”⁴ As a result, many better-off

Filipinos not only feel contempt for dirty or incompetent politicians, they also have misgivings about the poor who keep reelecting them. Not *all* wealthy Filipinos possess such feelings, of course. Crony capitalists who bankroll clientelist politicians, and members of the higher classes who distance themselves from reform groups, among others, surely hold different opinions. Still, misgivings about the poor can be heard in sitting rooms, coffee houses, and office buildings across the country, and read in almost all of the major newspapers.

These apprehensive feelings towards the poor intensified during the turbulent five months leading up to the legislative and local elections of May 2001. The period began with an aborted impeachment trial of President Estrada on charges of graft, bribery, and corruption. A massive popular demonstration soon followed, which resulted in his forced resignation and subsequent arrest. This provoked another, even larger, counter-demonstration in his support which culminated, just two weeks before the elections, in a violent attempt to storm Malacañang Palace and remove from power the new president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Underlying this tumult was a gaping class divide: those who sought to remove Estrada from the presidency were drawn largely from the middle and upper classes, while those who tried to defend or reinstate him were for the most part poor.

Middle and upper class apprehensions found a particularly high-tech but lowbrow outlet during the pro-Estrada demonstrations, commonly referred to as “Edsa 3.”⁵ The many critics of Estrada exchanged an enormous number of text messages with disparaging jokes about the poor who attended these demonstrations.⁶ Text messaging, it is important to note, is wildly popular in the Philippines among those wealthy enough to afford cellphones: in 2001 subscribers sent at least 70 million messages daily.⁷ The political power of text messaging became evident during the oust-Estrada “Edsa 2” rallies when anti-Estrada jokes, news flashes, and instructions were sent around frenetically. Many observers believe that this texting played a pivotal role in mobilizing and organizing demonstrators. The power of text reappeared during Edsa 3, though this time around the messages took aim not only at Estrada, but also at the poor who gathered to support him.

Some messages questioned the motives of those who went to Edsa 3 by mocking their hunger and poverty. One message read: “Edsa 1: free the nation from a dictator. Edsa 2: free the nation from a thief. Edsa 3: free lunch, dinner, breakfast and snacks too. . .let’s go!” In other words, those who participated in Edsa 1 and Edsa 2 were moved by their principles, those who gathered at Edsa 3 were there for the handouts. Other messages derided those who went to Edsa 3 for being stupid: “The world’s looking at the Philippines again. The rally at Edsa will be in the Guinness Book of World Records for the largest gathering of fools, idiots and imbeciles ever.” Still other messages disparaged those at Edsa 3 for being unclean: “Calling all the filthy and ignorant, the toothless and unclothed, let’s prove we have no brains—go to Edsa, please pass.” This form of derision was not confined to texting. In the Tagalog-language media, the poor who rallied at Edsa 3 were referred to as *mabaho* (smelly) and *hindi naliligo* (unbathed). In the English language media the poor were called more poetically “the great unwashed.” At least one cartoonist feared the Edsa 3 rebellion of the poor would sully the upcoming elections (see illustration 5).

This focus on dirt reveals the journalists’ and texters’ class anxiety rather than their powers of observation.⁸ As the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) has taught us, “dirt” is something that is considered to be not in its proper place. In the eyes of many better-off voters, the poor have been literally out of place—both at Edsa and in the electoral arena. It is because the poor hold undue influence, many of the better-off believe, that politics is stinking and rotten.

The power of this dirt construct can be seen in the skewed reaction of President Arroyo when organizers of the Edsa 3 protest played over loudspeakers a well-known, ribald drinking



Illustration 5: *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 7, 2001.

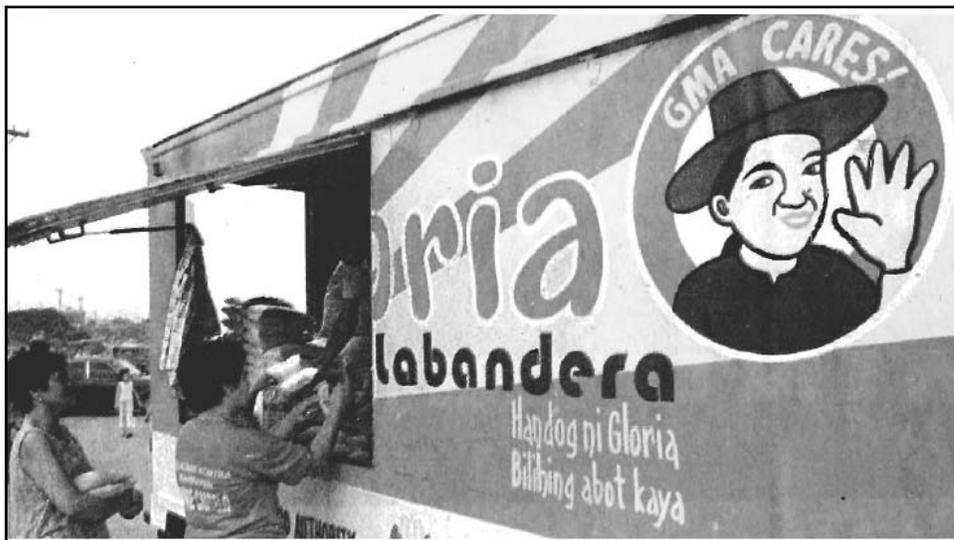


Illustration 6: Gloria Labandera rolling food store. Photo by Val Rodriguez, *Philippine Star*, July 25, 2001.



Illustration 7: *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 24, 2001.
President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo saying "This is what I use!"



Illustration 8: Main commercial street in Barangay Commonwealth. Photo by Frederic Charles Schaffer.



Illustration 9: *Philippine Star*, July 1, 2002.

ditty called “*Gloria Labandera*” (Gloria the laundrywoman) in an attempt to mock her. To their surprise, the president embraced the image. With pride, she revealed to the nation that she was, in fact, the granddaughter of a laundrywoman. Soon after, the National Food Authority began selling discounted rice and sugar from Gloria Labandera rolling stores (see illustration 6). A detergent manufacturer even proposed to the president using the name Gloria Labandera for a new line of soap.

The new president, in a metaphorical sense, was poised to launder the dirty nation (see illustration 7). But getting rid of dirt requires more than metaphorical cleansing or promotional gimmicks. Cleansing requires real action. “Filth is precisely that which we are taught to renounce and repel forcefully,” writes Filipino scholar Vicente Rafael, “while the inability to separate oneself from it is taken to be a pathological sign of immaturity and perversion that requires corrective intervention.”⁹ As Rafael suggests, there are at least two ways to clean that which is morally dirty: it can be repelled or corrected. Middle and upper class reformers in the Philippines have contemplated both strategies.

To repel dirt is to push it back to where it belongs. There are, for instance, those in the Philippines who have suggested barring the poor, or some portion of the poor, from participating in elections at all—an idea that has even attracted the attention of the lofty Newsmakers Breakfast Forum. One proposal is to disfranchise those who do not file tax returns; another is to require voters to pass a competency test to limit the franchise to the better educated, who also happen to be the better-off.

Neither of these solutions have been implemented. Nor is it likely that either will be anytime soon, since each would face serious political and constitutional challenges. Thus most reformers—for practical, political, or ethical reasons—have banked on a different way to put the poor in their place: corrective intervention. That is, they have tried to discipline the poor, to train them to vote correctly. “We call the poor dumb for not voting wisely,” one columnist observed, “which is just another way of saying for not voting the way we want them to.”¹⁰

Voter education, however, requires knowledge about those to be educated. To effectively teach people how to vote “wisely” requires understanding the reasons why they vote “unwisely.” After Edsa 3, there was a new awareness among members of the middle and upper classes that they did not really understand those whom they wanted to educate. “Isn’t it amazing that in this day and age there still exist undiscovered islands in our archipelago?” writes one commentator. “In early May we discovered one such island: a colony of smelly, boisterous and angry people. They are the poor among us.”¹¹

Philippine Democracy Viewed from Below

How, then, do the poor—this “undiscovered colony”—understand Philippine democracy, and their place in it? To explore this question I, along with two research assistants, conducted 139 interviews with a random sample of registered voters in four areas of Barangay Commonwealth, Quezon City (see illustration 8).¹² Quezon City, located within Metro Manila, is the largest city in the country. It has a population of over two million (the population of Manila itself has only 1.5 million). Commonwealth is the largest barangay in Quezon City, with a population of about 120,000. (A barangay is the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines). The people who live in Commonwealth are predominately poor. The four areas in Commonwealth under study, with a total population of about 14,000 registered voters, have no class A or B residents, and only ten percent who belong to class C. The vast majority fall within the D and E classes. Barangay Commonwealth is thus a typical urban poor community.

What we learned from the interviews was that to many residents of Commonwealth, a major

problem with Philippine democracy is that the poor are not shown kindness or respect, that those with power and money act in ways that are rude, hurtful, or unlawful. As a dressmaker explained to us, “there is no democracy at this time because they [the rich] don’t listen to the poor. The way they look at us is really ugly.” One woman described her own personal experience:

The rich treat us so inhumanely. They look at us as if we were rats. When I used to work as a house helper my employer used to beat me. . .Someone called on the phone, and she accused me of giving out the number. She started hitting me all over. She was rich so she felt she had the right to do that.

This kind of treatment understandably leads to feelings of insult and indignity. Such feelings help explain why Edsa 3 received such widespread support from Commonwealth residents. To them, the demonstrations represented above all a plea or demand on the part of the poor to be noticed, to be heard, and to be treated with humanity.

In terms of electoral politics, this moral calculus leads many voters to choose candidates whom they perceive to be caring, kind, and helpful; candidates who respect their *kapwa*—their fellow human beings, especially those who are poor.¹³

It is not that issues and policies are irrelevant to poor voters, but even abstract concerns often get translated into a language of personalized care. It is this language of caring that so many people in Commonwealth use, even when talking about politics “in general.” One housewife, for instance, explained to us that “a politician who treats other people [kapwa] well will always win.” A low-level accountant similarly told us that, “when we vote for a person. . .he should do good things for us. He should be able to help us if we’re in need. If there is a disagreement among us, he should show us that he’s concerned.” Not surprisingly, many people we spoke with judged candidates on their concrete acts of caring. Typical were the reasons why this unemployed widower voted for then-Congressman Sonny Belmonte to be mayor of Quezon City:

He’s very helpful to fellow human beings. He helps the poor. He helped me personally. When my wife was dying, I asked for his help. I told him I didn’t have the money to pay the hospital bills, and he gave me 5,000 pesos. I had first gone to [Congressman] Liban [another candidate for mayor]. The people in his office told me to go to the Quezon Institute, or to go ask Belmonte. They told me to go here; they told me to go there. My gosh, they made me feel so stupid!

This old man did not vote for Liban because his staff refused his request for assistance. Worse, they gave him the run-around. To him it was humiliating and shaming. Belmonte, in contrast, just helped. He treated the man with dignity.

Politics, then, for many among the poor in Barangay Commonwealth is a politics of dignity. “Bad” politics is a politics of callousness and insult, while “good” politics is a politics of consideration and kindness. In contrast, many in the upper and middle classes tend to view “bad” politics as a dirty politics of patronage and corruption, while they see “good” politics as a clean politics of issues, accountability, transparency. Interestingly, the personalized distribution of material rewards from candidate to voter figures prominently in both lower and upper class characterizations, but the value placed upon this distribution is inverse: lauded in one but reviled in the other.

Class and the Meaning of Vote Buying

Viewed in this perspective, it becomes easier to see how the fight against vote buying—and more

broadly the effort to replace dirty politics with clean politics—is disproportionately a middle and upper class project. What is less obvious is that this class character of reform has consequences. Perhaps most importantly, it has led reformers to misunderstand the electoral practices they seek to curtail.

Many in the middle and upper classes share the opinion, voiced here by a newspaper editorialist, that “the *masa* [masses] treats elections as mere fund-raising circuses.”¹⁴ Votes, in this view, are simple commodities that poor folks exchange for money, without any moral or political reflection. “Ignorant” voters literally chase after the money of corrupt politicians (see illustration 9). It follows that an important way to combat vote-buying is to provide poor voters with a moral education to, in the words of one journalist, “rescue” them “from the bondage of ignorance.”¹⁵

Many of the 2001 advertisements discussed at the beginning of this paper—ads that exhorted the poor to vote their conscience, love their country, or have self-respect—issue from the same world view. Moreover, these public service ads echo, in a more polite form to be sure, the same assumptions present in the derogatory Edsa 3 text messages. The poor, in both cases, are presumed to be desperate, short-sighted, and lacking in moral or political discernment. Just as the text messages assume the poor went to Edsa for the free meals and not out of principle, these ads assume that the poor participate in elections simply as a way to come into some fast money.

But do the poor, even those who accept money from candidates, really use their votes in that way? I was able to place a few questions on the topic of vote buying in a national, post-election survey of 1,200 Filipinos.¹⁶ Responses from that survey show that “vote selling” is more complex than a simple exchange of votes for money. This should come as no surprise if we remember the language used by the residents of Commonwealth.

In the national survey, only thirty-eight percent of poor (class D and E) voters who accepted money reported voting for the candidate, or roster of candidates, on whose behalf the money was offered. Of that thirty-eight percent, one in five said they would have voted the same way had they not been offered anything. Thus money appears to have influenced decisively the vote of only about thirty percent of the poor voters who accepted it. In other words, most voters who received money still apparently exercised their freedom of choice.

Furthermore, those who accepted money had mixed sets of motives for doing so. To be sure, economic motives are sometimes powerful. In the national survey, twenty-nine percent responded that they accepted the money because they needed it. But there are other, more morally-saturated reasons as well, including a desire not to embarrass the person who did the offering (9%), and a belief that it’s an obligation of candidates to give money or things to their supporters (9%).

When these survey responses are put into the context of the open-ended interviews we conducted with poor voters in Commonwealth and other areas of Metro Manila, a still more complex picture emerges. There we found that many people accept money because they do not see all forms of money-giving as attempts to purchase their votes. Local ward leaders who actually distribute the money often say it is simply a “handout” that does not obligate the voter to the candidate. Indeed, many voters that we talked to distinguish giving money with strings attached (what they call “vote buying”) from giving money without such strings (what they call “goodwill” money). And most people we spoke with see goodwill money as less problematic than vote-buying. In the words of one unemployed voter: “It’s definitely not ok to buy votes! That’s against the law. But to spend money for the purpose of spreading the candidate’s name and goodwill, I guess that’s ok.”

Goodwill money is given as a gesture of generosity on the part of a candidate. It carries no explicit understanding that the voter will cast a ballot for that candidate. What it may do is to

demonstrate to the voter that this is indeed a candidate who cares, who pays attention to the poor. It did, at least, seem to have that effect on one laundry woman, who explained to us that “there were no conditions attached to the money that they gave me so I didn’t feel I had any obligation to them. But I voted for them just because they bothered at all to give me something.”

It appears, then, that to many urban poor voters the moral calculus involved in deciding whether to accept money or gifts is embedded within, and derived from, the politics of dignity described above. It is alright to accept gifts if they come from candidates who are showing consideration, paying attention, offering their hand in help. A similar calculus appears, furthermore, to be used by the rural poor. Indicative is how voters in the village of San Isidro, Bataan reacted to reformist candidates who ran on a platform of clean politics and elections. To distinguish themselves from corrupt traditional politicians, they refused to distribute money, or even to shake people’s hands. To voters this refusal signaled an unwillingness to “be in solidarity” with the community. As a result, the reformists fared poorly on election day in San Isidro (Alejo, Rivera, and Valencia 1996, 108-109), as they have in other rural parts of the country for apparently similar reasons (Hawes 1989, 17).

These observations suggest that voter education materials which tell people not to treat their votes like commodities miss the mark of how most poor voters think of their votes. The resulting friction between reality and representation generates much of the antipathy felt by many poor voters across the nation towards the education materials:

“I find this ad irritating; they think that when I vote it’s because of the money”
(small-town market woman).

“Automatically this ad impresses upon you that you can be bribed. I find that insulting” (nurse in Quezon City).

“This ad makes it seem that elections only focus on vote buying. It is insulting to those who don’t accept money” (village fisherman).

“The words hurt; they see voters as greedy” (domestic helper in Manila).

An anthropologist who studied the urban poor of Metro Manila provides an explanation for why these voters may have felt so offended:

What matters most to people. . . is the way others attribute or deny value to them as human beings. It is primarily in this context that wealth differences are to be understood. Indeed, it is the common *burgis* [bourgeois] tendency to portray the lives of the poor purely in terms of material deprivation that people. . . find so degrading and shaming. Seen as eking out a bare hand-to-mouth existence, they are effectively denied their own humanity and culture (Pinches 1992, 174).

It is precisely this *burgis* portrayal of the poor as people driven only by material need, as people without principles, that provided the basis for voter education in 2001, and that seemed to pique so many of the respondents.

The Damage to Democracy

Most poor voters that we interviewed do not like the feeling of being bought. Their reasons for accepting things from candidates are complex, and are often tied to their vision of what good

politics ought to be, or how good politicians ought to behave. Voter education materials that ignore this reality, and instead reproduce middle and upper class stereotypes of the poor, do not appear likely to change the behavior of those who accept money from candidates.

Such attempts at voter education, to make matters worse, are insulting to many poor voters, especially to those who do not engage in vote selling at all. Recall that thirty-five percent of the registered voters we interviewed in Metro Manila immediately after the 2001 elections were exposed to education materials during the campaign, and that twenty percent of all respondents, and a third of the non-vote selling respondents, found such materials to be offensive.

This offensiveness is damaging to democracy. Most directly, the education materials alienate the poor from the pollwatching organizations that produce and distribute most of the advertisements. The ire of many of the people that we interviewed, after all, was directed not only at the ads themselves, but at the people who put them out. To repeat two comments made by our interviewees: “they see voters as greedy” and “they think that when I vote it’s because of the money.”

This anger and alienation partially explains why Ppcrv and Namfrel officials complain regularly that they have difficulties recruiting volunteers, especially volunteers among the poor. In Quezon City, for instance, recruitment by the Ppcrv was twice as efficient in wealthier neighborhoods than in poor ones for the 2001 elections. Data I collected from 75 precinct territories spread over seven barangays and encompassing more than 113,000 registered voters show that the Ppcrv attracted one volunteer for every 119 registered voters from predominantly middle and upper class neighborhoods (70 or more percent ABC classes), while only one volunteer for every 240 voters from predominantly poor neighborhoods (70 or more percent D and E classes). Even though many among the poor support several core goals of the Ppcrv and Namfrel—such as reducing the incidence of intimidation, vote padding, disfranchisement, and ballot box snatching—they are not joining these organizations in large numbers.

Therein lies the problem for democracy. Groups like the Ppcrv and Namfrel engage not only in civic education, but pollwatching as well. They are the watchdogs charged with safeguarding the honesty of elections by monitoring or participating in all stages of the election process from registration to voting to counting to canvassing. Thus the quick count of Namfrel helps deter politicians and their confederates from padding and shaving vote tallies, while Ppcrv volunteers who staff voters assistance desks in polling centers around the country help thousands of voters find their precincts, thereby reducing the number of disfranchised voters. The less grassroots support these volunteer organizations receive, the less able they are to do their job. By alienating the poor, civic education materials designed to reduce electoral manipulation have thus had the ironic and unintended effect of diminishing the ability of pollwatchers to guard against malfeasance and administrative neglect.

We can see this dynamic most clearly at the grassroots level, especially with regards to the Ppcrv. During the run up to the 2001 elections, many alienated parishioners in Barangay Commonwealth stopped participating in church activities, including those sponsored by the Ppcrv. Even some neighborhood leaders of the church distanced themselves from the Ppcrv, refusing to help recruit volunteers for the 2001 elections.

Intensifying the alienation of Commonwealth residents was the bundling of the 2001 campaign against vote buying with partisan attacks on former President Estrada. This politician, to reformers, represented the worst kind of dirty politics. Indeed, both the national chairman of Namfrel and its general secretary were, in the months and weeks leading up to Edsa 2, among the most highly visible and vocal figures calling for Estrada’s resignation, as were the Archbishop of Manila, the honorary chairman of the Ppcrv, and other officials of the Catholic Church. In reaction, many Catholic parishioners in Commonwealth disassociated themselves from the

church, citing the frequent “political” and “anti-Erap” sermons of the parish priest and the Archbishop of Manila as their reasons. Even national leaders of the Catholic Church acknowledge that the many among the poor have distanced themselves from mainstream Catholicism. In the words of Father Anton Pascual of the Catholic Church-operated Radio Veritas, “We saw in Edsa 3 that the poor [are] no longer with the Church” (Rufo 2001, 8). The loss here is not only to the Catholic Church. Democracy also suffers to the extent that one of the national organizations most important in ensuring honest, credible polling is losing credibility among the poor.

The effects of alienation ripple beyond pollwatching. It also deepens the rift between rich and poor, for the offensiveness of voter education is, to borrow a phrase from the sociologists Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1973), an “injury of class.” Many among the poor experienced the education materials, after all, as an attack on their dignity. This idea was expressed obliquely by a health care worker, who explained to us that “many are vulgar when they speak. They don’t mind if what they say is hurting other people.” Where the poor feel disrespected, even small acts of class ridicule take on big meaning. One Commonwealth resident explained how, while he was at the Edsa 3 protest rally, “some cars of wealthy people passed us by and they threw coins at us. In their eyes we are not worth any more than pocket change. It’s because of things like that that emotions ran high.” To many of the poor we interviewed, the contempt shown by throwing change from a window was little different from the contempt expressed in the voter education ads. Both issued from a mind-set that conceives of the poor as ready to dive or vote blindly for a handful of coins.

Where class sensibilities are so brittle, and where civic educators (among others) keep inflicting injuries of class both small and large, outbreaks of class rage become a dangerous possibility. It makes “emotions run high” as we saw when rioting broke out around the presidential palace during the climax of Edsa 3. The tendency towards violence only increases where the poor believe that the rich manipulate the rules of the democratic game to their own advantage. In the words of one food service worker we interviewed, “the law is for those who have money. If you are poor, they just kill you.” When people lose faith in the law, it becomes difficult to contain demands and grievances within the confines of lawful democratic procedure.

It is thus not surprising that the commitment of the poor to procedural democracy is shaky. National surveys consistently show significant numbers of the poor are not fully convinced that democracy is best for them. Among the recent polls: one in five class D and E members surveyed in 2001 disagreed with the statement that “democracy may have problems but it’s better than any other form of government” (Social Weather Stations 2001). In 2003, 18 percent of class D respondents and 24 percent of class E respondents believed that “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one,” while another 20 percent of class D respondents and 22 percent of class E respondents felt that “for people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic or a non-democratic regime” (Social Weather Stations 2003).

We must be careful, of course, not to overstate the role of civic education in generating this indifference to, or suspicion of, democracy. It is, after all, nearly impossible to measure directly and accurately the impact of voter education campaigns on the value that poor people attach to democracy; there are too many other factors that also shape opinion. Indeed, the small injuries of class inflicted by individual voter education advertisements may be of little consequence on their own. But repeated many times over, and combined with other injuries of class, these education materials may well be eroding the commitment of the poor to democracy in their own small but diffuse ways.

Comparative Perspectives

Under what conditions are middle and upper classes likely to embark on anti-vote buying civic education campaigns? Under what conditions are such campaigns likely to fail or backfire? Let me provide here only two comparative reflections.

First, reformers typically turn their attention to the behavior of individual voters only when elections are truly competitive. Where the middle class—or fragments of the middle class—are still fighting for competitive democracy their reformist energies tend to be focused more on loosening administrative restrictions or curtailing government abuses than on changing the behavior of the poor.

To limit our focus to Southeast Asia, this fight for democracy is still ongoing in both Malaysia and Cambodia, and only recently (and provisionally) won in Indonesia. Consequently, groups like the Malaysian Citizen's Election Watch, or the Cambodian Committee for Free and Fair Elections (Comfrel) have not really devoted their resources to voter education (though the Comfrel did distribute in the run up to the 2003 elections copies of a leaflet called "the consequences of vote buying"). In Indonesia, election watchdog groups are still in the early stages of getting organized, most having experience only with the 1999 and 2004 polls.

Within Southeast Asia, Thailand and the Philippines are the countries where electoral competition is today most open and sustained. So it is not coincidental that it is in Thailand and the Philippines where the most aggressive voter education campaigns have been mounted.

Interestingly, it is the middle class in Thailand that most actively works to promote clean elections. Pollwatch, by far the largest pollwatching group in the country, draws most of its volunteers from this class: one survey found that sixty-four percent of PollWatch volunteers in the 1992 election belonged to the middle class (LoGerfo 2000, 228-29). Indeed PollWatch prefers to recruit its members from the middle class. As one scholar observed during the 1995 election, "since low education levels are seen as one of the main supports of election fraud, PollWatch actively recruited 'educated people'—students, teachers, business people, lawyers, civil servants—to work at the volunteer level" (Callahan 2000, 9). Thus, as in the Philippines, there is a class dimension to clean election reform: urban middle class organizations such as Pollwatch are trying to discipline how the rural poor vote. As one scholar commented on the 1992 election, "these middle class stalwarts were acting to ensure that Thailand's largely rural electorate would choose only 'good' politicians who did not buy votes" (LoGerfo 2000, 229).

As in the Philippines, the poor in Thailand have sometimes reacted to the educational efforts of Pollwatch and other civic educators in ways unanticipated by reformers. Recall the reaction of school kids to the anti-vote buying television ads, or the reaction of those who attended the educational forums in Chiang Mai Province. Both the forums and tv ads generated the very beliefs and behaviors they were designed to forestall.

The second comparative point is that voter education seems most likely to have unintended consequences when it is undertaken by middle classes in formation, by middle classes trying to define who they are in contrast to the poor. Such is the case in both the Philippines and Thailand.

Class, it is important to recall, is in part a cultural construction which requires active work of self definition. While class no doubt has something to do with wealth and/or one's place in the economy, it is also constructed out of shared values, tastes, habits and (most importantly for our inquiry) political commitments (Bourdieu 1984). The problem is that the task of self definition often gets transformed into a project of hegemony as new classes attempt to impose their recently created "superior" lifestyle on the poor (Frykman and Lofgren 1987). In this context, then, we should note that sizeable middle classes in both Thailand and the Philippines are fairly

new, products of the Asian miracle of the 1970s-90s (Hewison 1996, 139-145; Pinches 1996, 115-123). As a consequence of this newness, the middle classes in both countries are culturally inchoate. In the Philippines, “the newness of the middle classes gives rise to *homines novi* in search of a format and a culture” (Mulder 1997, 115); while in Thailand, “diverse fragments and diverse constructions. . . have not yet been conflated into a single social class” (Ockey 1999, 245).

The incipient nature of middle class culture has led to much storytelling by middle class intellectuals in both countries as they try to work out what it might mean to belong to the middle class. In Thailand such cultural work has resulted in an ongoing effort “to construct the Thai middle class in terms of political practice and ideology” (Ockey 1999, 240). In the Philippines it has produced what one historian called “*burgis* [bourgeois] projects’: efforts on the part of middle upper class intellectuals to construct and display Filipino society and culture mainly to themselves” (Cullinane 1993, 74). As in Thailand, one finds a strong political and ideological component in that construction.

Public service ads that describe the evils of vote buying appear to be part of these middle class storytelling projects. Political education campaigns, in other words, might not only be intended for the poor; they may also serve to remind middle class Thais and Filipinos of who they are and how they are different from—and morally or politically superior to—the poor. One scholar thus described the drive to curb vote buying in Thailand as an unintended form of “middle-class cultural imperialism” resulting from attempts to construct a class ideology. “The unfortunate side-effect of these attempts,” he writes, “has been to consolidate a conviction among the middle classes that democracy belongs to the middle class, and that the lower classes are incapable of effective participation in a democratic system. The middle class frustration with the common practice of vote-buying is the most dramatic indication of this attitude” (Ockey 1999, 245-246). The same could have been written of the Philippines.

It may thus not be coincidental that in the Philippines, many of the anti-vote buying print ads produced for the 2001 elections ran in the English-language newspapers read mostly by the middle and upper classes, just as if not more frequently than they did in the less expensive, Tagalog-language tabloids. The ad placed by the makers of Red Horse Beer, for instance, appeared only in English-language newspapers (even if the ad itself was in Tagalog). It is also suggestive that the agencies involved in crafting the Philippine ads did not, as they usually do, submit their ideas to focus group testing. Instead they relied, in the words of one ad executive who coordinated the Namfrel campaign, on their “own observations and personal experiences.” This comment shows to what extent the ad makers relied on their own conventional views of “the poor” when crafting their messages. Whatever the intent, the effect was to communicate higher class sensibilities to a variety of class audiences. The problem, of course, is that the resulting stereotyped images, however reaffirming to the self-image of higher class Filipinos, stood little chance of changing the behavior of the poor, and sometimes aroused instead their indignation and resentment.

Conclusion

Efforts to clean up elections through voter education are disciplinary projects that sometimes go awry. From this perspective, clean(er) elections represent not solely a triumph of democracy, but also an outcome that may carry with it unanticipated reactions and unforeseen costs. In Thailand, attempts to educate voters left people more likely to engage in vote selling. In the Philippines, such attempts handicapped the pollwatching groups charged with safeguarding the integrity of elections, and may have further estranged the poor not only from the rich, but from democracy itself.

As we have seen, these unhappy consequences can result from, among other things, a clash of moral codes, especially ones that pit higher class reformers against lower class “wrongdoers.” Such class-based clashes are likely to originate, it appears, in attempts of new middle classes to build a political culture of their own, and the distorting effect that this culture building project has on how higher class reformers perceive, and act upon, the poor and their politics.

To the extent that clean election reform in general, and anti-vote buying campaigns in particular, have been undertakings of middle and (sometimes) upper classes around the world today from Taiwan to Brazil to Mexico, the problem of class-bound misperception may be widespread. Certainly this problem was present during earlier eras of reform. During the progressive period in the United States, for instance, “contemporary observers of fraud were predominantly middle- and upper-class native-born elites who confused the issue of illegal voting practices with their own moral beliefs about how citizens should exercise their rights to vote” (Mayfield 1993, 62; see also Allen and Allen 1981, 171-176).

Even where anti-vote buying campaigns are not class projects, this examination of civic education in the Philippines and Thailand highlights the importance of adequately understanding the practices one wishes to reform. Vote buying carries different meanings to different people, and these meanings can vary not only by class, but also by religion, ethnicity, levels of education, or the like. Civic education campaigns will be unlikely to succeed if they are not sensitive to these lived meanings.

No doubt, this variability of lived meaning raises a set of thorny normative questions. Should reformers be aiming to “correct” voters, to eliminate vote buying, if indeed it is not the amoral, short-sighted economic transaction they imagine it is, but rather something else, something involving moral judgment and political reasoning? Relatedly, is vote buying really a serious defect of the Philippine and Thai electoral systems, or do efforts to discipline vote sellers reflect instead middle class fantasies and anxieties blown out of proportion? One scholar goes so far as to argue that in Thailand “vote-buying is not as big a problem as is our obsession with it” (Callahan 2002, 24). Could he be right?

As an incomplete answer to these questions let me make only the briefest of observations. Different types of vote buying surely have differential implications for various aspects of democracy, not the least of which is accountability. There is a difference between a candidate who literally purchases votes and a candidate who performs favors as an ostensible gesture of caring. In the former case, accountability may run no deeper than the demand for a periodic electoral payoff. In the latter case, it can take the form of ongoing demands for help. Certain forms of vote buying, then, impose a kind of accountability on politicians, and provide important sources of help for poor and vulnerable people. These forms of vote buying may well be more consonant with norms of democracy and social welfare than are vote-for-cash market transactions.

Still, no matter what meanings people attach to vote buying, or how much accountability it might entail, or how much help individuals receive, there are certain ills that typically go along with vote buying that make it a less than benign practice. To give but one example, in both Thailand and the Philippines vote buying is tied intimately to organized crime. Politicians need to raise large sums of money to buy votes, and because vote buying is illegal, the sources of those funds must remain clandestine. Often politicians turn to smugglers, gambling kingpins, drug syndicates, and kidnap-for-ransom rings to provide those untraceable funds. In Thailand, much of the money comes from provincial mafia-like “godfathers” (Ockey 2000). In the Philippines, the chairman of the House Committee on Dangerous Drugs estimated in 2003 that one quarter of all elected officials received money from drug barons.¹ The number of bank robberies, illegal gambling operations, and kidnappings-for-ransom in that country spike just before the beginning of each election season.¹⁸

If vote buying candidates in Thailand and the Philippines are elected, criminals get their financial support repaid in cash, cronyism, and protection. Vote buying thus not only fuels robbery, murder, and trafficking, it also extends the reach of organized crime by expanding the political influence of the criminal financial backers upon which candidates rely. Thus whatever benefits may accrue to individual voters, or whatever moral rationality they may be exercising, the criminality and criminalization of politics caused by vote buying imposes heavy societal costs that may well justify efforts to curb it. The open question is whether civic educators will be able to find ways to convince those who accept money that vote selling is not in their own, or their community's, best interest.

ENDNOTES

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- 1 These communities were located in the National Capital Region and the provinces of Quezon and Catanduanes in Luzon, Iloilo province in the Visayas, and North Cotabato province in Mindanao.
- 2 In Taiwan, vigorous law enforcement has been more important, while in Thailand, voter education has been accompanied by deep institutional reform.
- 3 The survey was commissioned by the author. It was conducted by Pulse Asia from June 15-26, 2001. It gathered data through face-to-face interviews with 1,200 adult respondents nationwide chosen using multi-stage probability sampling for an error margin of +/- 3%.
- 4 Rene Espina, "Minding Other People's Business," *Manila Bulletin* 5/20/01.
- 5 EDSA is the main thoroughfare that runs through Metro Manila. It was the site of the mass demonstrations that culminated in the ouster of Marcos in 1986, an event commonly referred to as "EDSA 1." It was also the focal point for the disproportionately middle and upper class "EDSA 2" protests that led to the ouster of Estrada in January 2001 (a Pulse Asia survey found that 65% of the adults who rallied at EDSA 2 came from the ABC classes; if class D rallyists with some college education or middle class occupations are included, then the total middle and upper class representation jumps to 74% [Bautista 2001, 8]). And it was there again that hundreds and thousands gathered in late April and early May 2001 to protest Estrada's arrest, usually called "EDSA 3."
- 6 Even though I did not engage in partisan politics while in the Philippines, I myself received dozens of such messages. Many were also reprinted approvingly by newspaper columnists.
- 7 According to a June 2001 Pulse Asia survey, 63% of those in the ABC classes own cell-phones, compared to only 18% in class D, and 4% in class E.
- 8 Class anxiety was reflected in discourses of "dirt" and "smell" in early 20th century Sweden and pre-World War II England as well. See Frykman and Löfgren (1987, 261-62), and Orwell ([1937] 1958, 127-36).
- 9 Vicente L. Rafael, "Dirty Words," *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 7/24/01.
- 10 Conrado de Quiros, "Tongues on Fire," *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 5/1/01.
- 11 Leandro V. Coronel, "Discovering the Poor," *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 5/19/01.
- 12 We chose at random from the voter registry two percent of the people who were listed as

living in each of the four areas. Of the people who actually still lived there—many had moved abroad or to the provinces after registering, and a few had died—our response rate was eighty-one percent.

- 13 On the meaning and significance of *kapwa*, see Enriquez (1986).
- 14 Jarius Bondoc, “It’s Not Just Erap, It’s the System,” *Philippine Star* 4/1/00.
- 15 Belinda Olivares-Cunana, “Students Should Help Educate Voters,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 3/13/01.
- 16 See footnote 4.
- 17 “Lawmaker: One-fourth of Public Officials Funded by Drug Barons,” *Philippine Star* 6/26/03.
- 18 “‘Jueteng’ Return Driven by 2004 Polls,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 10/7/02. “Solon Sees Link Between Bank Heists, 2004 Polls,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 9/14/03. “President Orders: ‘Go After Politicians Behind Kidnaps,’” *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 10/31/03.

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