

THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

A study of local politics, particularly of local elections, is an important part of the study of local government in general. Election results from 1992 to May 2001 were analyzed in this study. Focus is directed on women's participation in elections as voters, locally elected officials, as well as their gender roles. Further focus is given to local elections where many women run for office.

The study shows that women have indeed surpassed obstacles, both social and cultural, in the environment. They are now able to participate in the political scene specifically by occupying various positions in the different levels of government. Although there is only a slight increase in the number of women elected to local government positions, there is in fact an increase in their overall electoral participation.

INTRODUCTION

As mandated by law, the Philippines must regularly spend for the simultaneous national and local elections on the second Monday of May every three years. Elections are the lifeblood of republicanism. The 1987 Constitution has declared that “*the*

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Philippines is a democratic and republican state. Sovereignty resides in the people and all government authority emanates from them". By a republican state, this would mean that all government authority is exercised by the people through their chosen leaders and representatives.

Elections are seen as the vehicle by which people may exercise some degree of control over their leaders and representatives. It is a process through which a peaceful transfer of office may take place. In other countries, voters must choose from among several political parties, while in the Philippines, voters usually choose from among personalities. Public officials are directly elected by their constituents except for partylist representatives in Congress and are voted into office through the plurality of votes in the locality where they are running.

Elections are more personalized in the Philippines. Filipinos manually write the names of candidates of their choice in a bond-sized piece of paper, affix their thumb marks and deposit this into a tightly-sealed and guarded ballot box. The counting process most often takes place in front of a jam-packed audience of watchers, counsels, political supporters and local town folks in the hundreds of thousands of voting precincts across the archipelago. The process can turn into a hotly contested battle between camps. The entire armed forces and police force, which are deputized to insure the peaceful and orderly conduct of the elections, are mobilized. One entire day is allotted for this exercise and almost four months in the election year is blocked off as election period.

Presidential elections were separately held from local elections. This, however, changed after the passage of Republic Act No. 7166, otherwise known as The Synchronized Elections and Electoral Reforms Law of 1991, which was implemented only in 1992. Based on the records of the Commission on

Elections (COMELEC), there were a total¹ of 22 local elections (post-war) held since 1947 until 2001.

Election watchers worldwide, especially from those belonging to Third World countries, acknowledge the significance of elections.

“Elections provide for a bare minimum of political participation, perhaps the only act of political participation for the vast majority of the governed, and thus provide a feeling of belonging and a degree of responsibility for government decisions. Similarly, elections in any political system are a form of political communication between governments and the governed, a means by which political decision-makers are made to become sensitive to the electorate’s political demands and in turn are in a position to educate the electorate on important political issues.” (www.kenyaweb.com, 2001)

OBJECTIVES AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The move to decentralize government administration or, similarly, the move to give a higher degree of autonomy to local government units, was premised on the declared objective of bringing governance closer to the people. It was presumed that local governments, owing mainly to their proximity to the citizenry, are better equipped to adopt and implement policies that bring appropriate and effective services to the people. Thus, the need to decentralize, to a reasonable extent, delivery of government services. This, in essence, was the aim of the Republic Act No. 7160 better known as the Local Government Code of 1991.

The Philippines has been used to a centralized government structure and thus quite a number of issues on the effectiveness,

¹This number includes: four Barangay elections, three ARMM elections, two Sangguniang Kabataan elections, two Sangguniang Pampook Members elections for Region 9 and 12.

practicality, or even the wisdom, of local autonomy were expectedly raised. Most of these issues concern the readiness, or lack of it, of local government units to handle devolved services, which were previously delivered by the national government agencies. The problem is not only one of funds but also one that relates to the competence and integrity of local government officials. In other words, no matter how noble the objectives of local autonomy are, its success depends, to a large extent, on the fitness, competence and integrity of the local executives and legislators.

During the May 14, 2001 elections, a total of 17,335 local officials (governors down to councilors) were elected to office. This makes up 98.73% of the total number of positions being contested in that election. Considering that under the system of democracy, local government units shall be headed by officials publicly elected to office, the question of competence and integrity of these officials are effectively thrown to the people. It is the people who are given the responsibility of choosing the right persons who shall govern the various local constituencies. Thus, a study of local politics, particularly of local elections, is an important part of the study of local government in general.

It is in this regard that we chose to examine election results from the 1992 elections to the most recent one in May 2001. It is to be noted that the 1992 elections were the first local elections conducted under the new Local Government Code.

Our larger study covered a wide area: 1) Basic election data and profile of voters; 2) participation of women in local elections; 3) local election results; 4) profile of elected local officials; and to a certain extent, 5) political dynasties at the local level.

For purposes of this publication, we will only focus on women's participation in elections as voters, locally elected officials, as well as their gender roles. Further focus is given to local elections, where many women run for office.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN NATIONAL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS

The number of registered voters by gender from 1992 to 1998 showed that female voters already outpaced male voters in the 1998 listing. Voting turnout percentages would show a similar trend. In 1992, there were more male voters, in terms of number, who trooped to the polls (12,142,090 vs. 12,112,864). However, the percentage turnout of female registered voters was higher than the turnout of males in all three elections from 1992 and 1998. Table 1 would show the rising trend of women's participation in national and local elections and Table 2 confirms this.

Table 1
Data on male registered voters vs. Data on female registered voters

TOTAL NO. OF REGISTERED VOTERS BY GENDER				
PHILIPPINES	ELECTION YEAR			
	1992	1995	1998	2001*
MALE	16,197,666	18,292,150	16,889,764	—
FEMALE	15,943,413	18,122,994	17,227,292	—
TOTAL	32,141,079	36,415,144	34,117,056	36,605,346

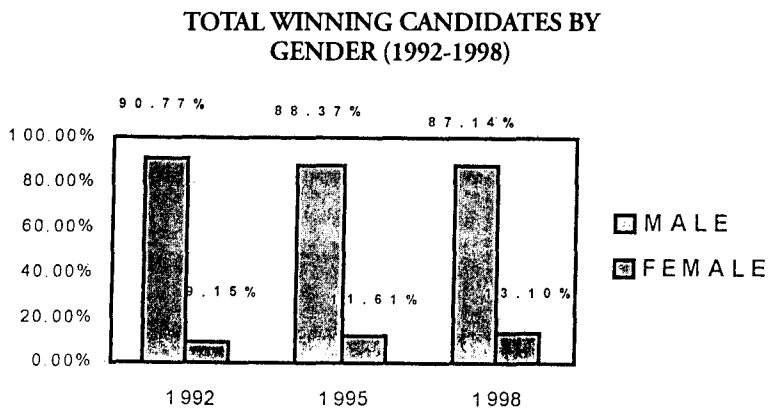
*COMELEC data as of May 5, 2001, not yet gender disaggregated.

Table 2
Voting turnout by gender

TOTAL NO. OF REGISTERED VOTERS WHO ACTUALLY VOTED BY GENDER						
	ELECTION YEAR					
	1992		1995		1998	
	NO.	TURNOUT	NO.	TURNOUT	NO.	TURNOUT
MALE	12,142,090	74.96%	12,860,637	70.31%	14,481,612	85.74%
FEMALE	12,112,864	75.97%	12,875,668	71.05%	14,992,697	87.03%
TOTAL	24,254,954	75.46%	25,736,305	70.68%	29,474,309	86.39%

The number of winning women candidates steadily rose since 1992, the first election held under a woman president. This is shown in Graph 1.

Graph 1
Ratio of male winning candidates vs. Ratio of female winning candidates



The percentage of women winning candidates was comparatively high for the position of councilor and governor with 18.25% and 15.38% respectively as shown in Table 3. Data on the 2001 winning candidates, however, may yield interesting results relating to the increasing trend observed in the three previous

Table 3
Percentage ratio of winning candidates by gender and by position per election year

POSITION	1992		1995		1998	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
Representative	89.66%	10.34%	89.66%	10.34%	90.38%	9.62%
Governor	91.78%	8.22%	87.00%	12.99%	84.36%	15.38%
Vice-Governor	93.15%	6.85%	84.42%	15.58%	89.74%	10.26%
Provincial Board	87.50%	12.50%	88.87%	11.13%	87.12%	12.88%
Mayor	96.63%	3.37%	91.84%	8.16%	85.50%	14.50%
Vice-Mayor	91.51%	8.49%	90.90%	9.10%	89.17%	10.83%
Councilors	85.19%	14.05%	85.91%	13.99%	83.74%	18.25%
AVE. TOTAL	90.77%	9.15%	88.37%	11.61%	87.14%	13.10%

elections, considering that the 2001 elections was conducted under the administration of another woman president. (There were indeed more women winners in 2001. See another paper in this issue —Ed.)

TRENDS ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

“Women’s involvement in the political process is, nowhere in the world, proportionate to the 50% of the population which they represent approximately or to their input to society.” (CAPWIP, N.D.) This is due to the fact that issues on women’s political participation and empowerment have long been neglected and even set aside by certain perceived priorities such as economic meltdown, inter-country feuds, natural and human made disasters and several other problems.

There is therefore a need to continuously determine and assess the current situation and modest advances made to promote women’s political participation in various countries around the globe in order to overcome the prevailing obstacles or threats while strengthening the opportunities of women towards such end goals. This is also to help stress relevant and responsive plans, programs and activities for further enhancing women’s political participation and empowerment.

Studies on women’s political participation indicate that in the 1960’s, the number of women in politics was low. However, in the mid-eighties women’s political participation was given priority through various means, such as, among others, the Beijing Conference, the creation and establishment of the Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics (CAPWIP) and the Global Network of Women in Politics (GlobalNet).

In another study on Philippine politics conducted by the UNESCO, it was found that after the post war period, Filipino

women have slowly entered the political scene through their own efforts, and also with the support of and encouragement from the male politicians who have been in politics for a long time and have already established their niche in that respect. The study showed that the common means for women's public involvement are through the local level groups and associations and other mass or sector-based organizations, the support extended by other cause-oriented groups, and the people themselves who want genuine political change. However, it should be pointed out here that the elite has greater access to politics due to their economic resources and competencies.

Despite this, the NCRFW and ADB study on *Filipino Women, Issues and Trends* established that there are still few women who join the electoral politics and as such, women's political participation, in general, remains limited. People's perception of women in politics has not yet been fully developed; thus, the support and encouragement from the society is low. In addition, certain women still have this lingering fear of their incapability to competently perform in the field of politics as equals of men. But then again, women politicians have successfully won seats in various government positions, and in the different levels of government.

According to an article by Christine Pintat entitled *A Global Analysis: What has Worked for Women in Politics and What Has Not (1975-1998)*, the evolution of women's political participation and empowerment can be traced to certain essential factors. These are: (1) a change in outlook, (2) an evolution of the legal environment, and (3) education and economic emancipation of women.

First, people's perception of the role of women in politics has greatly changed. The foremost evidence of this is that'....

“...democracy (the democratic electoral process) is no longer perceived as the private and exclusive domain of men. In fact, one of the founding principles of democracy is: The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in complementarity, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences.”

This means that men and women should act as partners or equals, towards the achievement of their common goals.

In a gender fair society, people become aware of the following: (1) that goods should be equally shared between men and women; (2) the exclusion of women in politics is indicative of the failure of democracy; (3) that in general, the society accepts women's right to vote, to be elected and to hold political and leadership positions; (4) that men are now more open to the idea of the participation and involvement of women in the political arena; and (5) that more women are now aware of their rights and privileges as equals of men. It is in this connection, that there is an emergent demand for an advocacy with both men and women; to involve both men and women in upholding and promoting women's political participation and empowerment; and for change to come from the women themselves through continuous organized discussions, networking and other related activities.

Second, the promotion of the role of women in politics is also evident in the evolution of the legal environment. For several decades, the women sector has struggled for gender equality. As a result of their enduring quest they have won the battle for suffrage and the right to aspire for participation in politics.

Before, there were obstacles to women's empowerment such as (1) the cultural stereotypes that perceive women as having no place in politics, outrightly excluded from the political realm and unfit to occupy elective and/or leadership positions; (2) the

institutional barriers present in the public sphere such as the lack of political will, the small percentage of women in politics, the pervasiveness of an all boys network, and the winner take all type of electoral system which discriminates against women who belong to the minority; and (3) the family and community values with its traditionalistic perspective which often runs contrary to such concepts as gender equality.

On the other hand, there were also opportunities for advancing women's political empowerment such as cheaper and more efficient access to information through the existence of telecommunication facilities that hasten organizing and networking activities; the advocacy for gender fair governance which emphasizes the partnership between men and women; and the need for an alternative leadership paradigm that is participative and gender sensitive.

Finally, the most important factor, which led to the promotion of women's political participation and empowerment, is their education and economic emancipation. With education, women are now more able to understand, appreciate and defend their rights and privileges. Further, since education has facilitated women's economical independence from men, they are granted the autonomy to decide on their own and for themselves. Consequently, they became more empowered and ever-ready to enter politics with men. Thus, the finding of UNESCO that "women politicians who have high education, training and competence as well as socio-economic resources have no problem in entering the political profession," (UNESCO, 1993) is valid.

In sum, women have indeed surpassed the obstacles, both social and cultural, in the environment. They are now able to participate in the political scene specifically by occupying various positions in the different levels of government. Although our

tables show that there is a slight increase in the number of women elected to local government positions, the fact is, there is still an increase in their overall electoral participation.

Thus, there are two challenges in terms of future directions: first is creating a conducive environment that promotes the role of women in politics, and second is strengthening political organizing towards women's political participation and empowerment. The former calls for tasking among the various sectors of society particularly the government, the private sector and the civil society towards good governance, while the latter attempts to strengthen the active role of women in politics within the context of gender equality.

Indeed, "women's political empowerment is a fundamental challenge for the coming millennium, since it will engage half of the world's population—the women, their organizations and movements. But it will also demand a commitment from government.

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