

# IS THERE A WOMEN'S VOTE?

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Is there a women's vote in the Philippines? The answer is obvious: There is none as yet. Despite this, it is useful to belabor the issue. The recent activism that women have shown makes us optimistic that there will be a women's vote soon. Perhaps what we can do at this time is to look back historically and try to understand why there has been so far no women's vote to enable us to make the necessary preparations to have it.

My discussion thus will look at two faces of the view of the women's vote. First, I will explain why there isn't any so far; and second, I will assess how there can be a woman's vote, for us and by us in the women's movement and other women as well.

## **Why There Is No Women's Vote So Far**

The women's vote has had a long and glorious history. We all know about the effort of the suffragists which started in 1906 and gained momentum in 1912, to get the vote for women in this country.

According to the great woman historian Encarnation Alzona, "the first advocate of women's suffrage in the Philippines was Apolinario Mabini who drafted a Constitution giving female tax payers 21 years and older the right to vote. However, that version of the Constitution was not adopted by the Malolos Congress" (Quoted by Torres: 1989). The efforts suffragists led by such luminaries as Concepcion Felix Rodriguez and Pura Villanueva Kalaw bore fruit when the 1935 Constitution finally provided for suffrage for women if, in a plebiscite conducted two years later, at least 300,000 women would vote in its favor. The suffragists then conducted a campaign persuading the women to come out and vote. The votes exceeded even their expectations. Over 500,000 women registered to vote, and an overwhelming 447,725 voted yes in the plebiscite (Camagay in Torres: 1989; Jayawardena: 1986).

However, we must make a distinction between women's suffrage, which literally means the right of women to vote for any candidate in office, and the women's vote. *The women's vote refers to a united vote of women for electoral candidates whom they consider will advance their cause.* Often the implication is a vote for women candidates. But it also implies a vote for male candidates who are considered "friendly", and even advocates of the

women's cause. So the suffragists got us the votes. But how are we using them? That question is answered by creating a solid women's vote.

### **Indicators for a Women's Vote.**

We must first understand that there has not been a women's vote so far. We can roughly use the following indicators: (1) voter turnout of women; (2) victory of women candidates at the polls; (3) experience of women political parties; and (4) women in political campaigns. Let us examine these one by one.

● **Voter Turn-out.** If voter turn-out is a good indicator, there should be a women's vote. COMELEC statistics from 1946 show that more women registered voters have been voting than men. (See Table 1) The average turn-out of women voters "was 79.29%, higher by 0.55 percentage points than the average turn-out rate of their male counterpart (Tancangco: 1990). From these, we can say that voting is a mode of political exercise in which women choose to participate.

The questions to ask are: How have the women voted? Do they vote for women? Do they vote for women-oriented candidates?

● **Women's Victory at the Polls.** As we know from observation and experience, the proportion of female political officials to male political officials at all levels of government is not proportional to their share of the Philippine population. Senators Rasul and Shahani have shown that the two women in the Senate constitute only 8.7%; 19 congresswoman in the House of Representative (now 18) constitute only 9.41% of its total members. This has been the case since 1946. COMELEC records also show that in all election years, the highest percentage of position held by women was only 12.05% except in 1969 when two women senators were elected out of 8 candidates, which raised the proportion to 25%. Overall, the proportion of elected women (63 out of 1264 posts filled) was 4.98% only (Table 2).

In the local government elections in 1971, only 6.6% of those elected were women. In 1980, their proportion slightly increased to 7.45%. In 1988, their proportion again rose to 9.79%. We therefore see a slow but steady increase. Compared to the national scene, there are more women elected to local government positions. Yet, compared to the voter turn-out, this is still low.

Of course, one good reason for this low percentage of women's victory in the polls is that there are few women candidates. But even in 1987 when 14 women candidates ran for the position of senator, only two women candidates made it, and they happened to belong to the President's party (Tancangco: 1990).

The women candidates themselves did not know if it was the women's vote that made them win. Eva Estrada Kalaw and Carmencita Reyes

doubted this as expressed by them in a talk show in 1984; yet Helena Benitez thought that the votes of the women of Cavite made her win. Senator Santanina Rasul attributes her victory to the women; she may be right, but we cannot discount the fact that she ran with the administration party which swept 22 out of 24 posts. This bandwagon effect also led to the administration party's victory in the 1988 local election (Aguilar: 1990).

Did the women's vote take President Aquino to victory? We know that it was the revolutionary fervor of the time which carried Cory to victory. The battle cry was to oust Marcos. Who was the best person to oust him except the widow of the man he persecuted, and whose assassination was considered to have been plotted by Marcos' group?

This brings us to the subject of widows in politics. Another widow, Magnolia Antonino, won the Senate seat that was meant for her husband who died in a plane crash while on the campaign trail. In Philippine history, another widow took over the revolt started by her dead husband, Diego Silang. Gabriela Silang is now immortalized through a national women's organization which has adopted GABRIELA as the acronym of the group's name.

● *Women Political Party.* The movement for women's suffrage was spearheaded by women in civic organizations. After the vote was won for women, the League of Women Voters was established to provide women with information about political issues, to enable them to vote intelligently. The Kababaihang Rizalista did likewise. In 1951, a National Political Party for Women was established "to consolidate the women's vote and thereby to cross party lines." (Tancangco: 1990). The movement fizzled out.

The move for a woman's political party was revised during the campaign for the 1987 elections with the establishment of the Kababaihan Para sa Inang Bayan (KAIBA), an all-women political party which put up candidates for legislative positions. As we all recall, only Congresswoman Nikki Coseteng won among the KAIBA candidates. Did she win because of the women? She undoubtedly received support from organized women, but she also won from the votes of the men and unorganized women. The KAIBA idea was too early for its time.

● *Women in Political Campaigns.* While there are no clear indications that there has so far been an effective women's vote, the women nevertheless have been effective as political campaigners. Every Presidential candidate had his/her own women campaigners: Women for Magsaysay in 1953, the Blue Ladies for Marcos, Osmeña Pearls in 1969, Cory's Crusaders and UNIDO Ladies in 1986. Daughters, and wives of the politicians that these women worked for were in the forefront of their campaigns.

That the women campaigners had been an asset to the candidates they worked for cannot be denied. Yet, considering that they took different sides during a campaign, we can conclude the obviousness of their being female

as having had nothing to do with the sides that they took in the elections. Only KAIBA had campaigners who worked to see to it that women got elected; the others did not. Moreover, it is not clear whether the candidates they supported might not have been feminists.

### **How Can We Have a Women's Vote?**

We have asserted here the absence of a women's vote so far. What is important at this point is whether we can have a women's vote in the future. We may look at two indicators: (1) the politicization of women's organizations and (2) the conscious formation of women's political organizations.

The politicization of women's organizations has been very swift since the last decade. The coalition of male and female groups like MAKIBAKA which has been in existence before Martial Law, women's organizations who bravely organized under repressive times like KABAPA, Pilipina, and GABRIELA have carried forward their political agenda. Other NGO's whose concerns have been mainly limited to special issues have also recognized that their seemingly personal concerns are also political. Thus, in the absence of a political party, it is women's organizations which have become more and more concerned about the necessity of getting involved in politics.

This awareness crystallized into a movement whose midwife has been Ugnayan ng Kababaihan sa Pulitika which through the auspices of Women in Nation Building (WIN) started training women to run for political office. At the WIN -sponsored Congress of Women in Politics last October almost 500 women attended, and made plans for more systematic campaigns.

Of late we have seen a close collaboration between women in the academe and women in NGO's. I would like to think that this collaboration has been very effective, that the academicians are being prodded to action while the NGO women also utilize ideas brought out by the findings of academicians. The collaboration between the Congress of Women in Politics held last year and this present forum here in the University of the Philippines, will not be as big in the sense of the previous Congress having prodded women to learn how to advance their own candidates while this one will inspire organized women to help in the candidacies of persons whom they think will advance the women's cause.

At no other time have the women been more active, individually and collectively; at no other time is their unity most needed. But do the women constituents have the same perception as to who among the eight Presidentiables and the hundreds of others running for office at all levels have the women's interest at heart? This is the question we must first answer as activist women before we can truly say that there is already a women's vote.



1946-1987				
Election Year	Position	No. of Women Elected	No. of Positions to be Filled	%
1946	Congresswoman	1	8	12.50%
1947	Senator	1	8	12.50%
1949	Congresswoman	1	100	1.00%
1953	Congresswoman	1	102	0.98%
1955	Senator	1	8	12.50%
1957	Congresswoman	1	102	0.98%
1961	Senator	1	8	12.50%
	Congresswoman	2	104	1.92%
1963	Senator	1	8	12.50%
1965	Senator	1	8	12.50%
	Congresswoman	6	104	5.77%
1967	Senator	2	8	25.00%
1969	Senator	0	8	0.00%
	Congresswoman	3	109	2.75%
1971	Senator	1	8	12.50%
1978	IBP Member	9	165	5.45%
1984	Mambabatas Pambansa	10	181	5.52%
1987	Senator	2	23	8.70%
	Congresswoman	19	202	9.41%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>1264</b>	<b>4.98%</b>
SOURCE: COMELEC				

Table 2