

Exploring political dynamics and governance practices in Central Visayas: a qualitative analysis of local leadership, civic engagement, and institutional challenges in Clarin, Bohol, and Cebu City

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Abstract: This study explores the contemporary political dynamics in Central Visayas by examining governance practices and civic engagement in Clarin, Bohol, and Cebu City, Cebu. Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilized surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs) to collect insights from key local stakeholders, including educators, government officials, and civil society leaders. Thematic analysis revealed five core themes: the public's demand for transparency and accountability, fear of political retaliation, preference for local over national leadership, the potential for youth empowerment, and recommendations for enhancing political inclusion. While trust in local leadership exists, the findings highlight persistent barriers to civic participation due to entrenched political structures and limited participatory mechanisms. The study underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms to promote more transparent, inclusive, and participatory governance in Central Visayas.

Keywords: Political dynamics, Civic engagement, Local governance, Transparency, Patronage, Central Visayas, Democratic reform, Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

The political landscape of the Philippines is characterized by a complex interplay between localized governance, civic participation, and the enduring influence of political dynasties. This complexity is especially evident in the Central Visayas region, where urban centers such as Clarin in Bohol and Cebu City in Cebu serve as microcosms for understanding how democratic governance operates at the grassroots level. These cities, marked by both civic activism and

political continuity, offer rich insights into everyday governance, power relations, and citizen engagement within a decentralized political system.

Since the implementation of the Local Government Code of 1991, decentralization reforms have aimed to empower local governments, improve service delivery, and foster citizen participation. However, despite these institutional measures, substantial challenges persist—particularly in promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. Issues such as political patronage, dynastic control, and civic disengagement continue to impede meaningful democratization at the local level. These structural and cultural barriers often lead to diminished public trust, weak youth engagement, and fear of political retaliation.

As economic and political hubs in the region, Clarin and Cebu City are strategic sites for examining local governance. Their diverse civic landscapes, active youth sectors, and blend of traditional and reformist political actors make them ideal case studies for this research. This study seeks to provide a nuanced, localized understanding of how governance is experienced, challenged, and potentially transformed in these two urban centers.

Understanding the interplay between political dynamics and governance practices in local contexts such as Clarin, Bohol, and Cebu City requires a comprehensive review of existing literature. This chapter synthesizes relevant studies on local governance, civic engagement, youth participation, political dynasties, and the structural barriers that shape democratic participation in the Philippines. Additionally, it presents the theoretical lenses that ground the study, namely Elite Theory and Participatory Governance Theory, to frame the analysis of the data gathered.

Local governance in the Philippines is deeply influenced by the decentralization reforms introduced through the Local Government Code of 1991, which aimed to empower local government units (LGUs) by devolving administrative functions and promoting citizen participation. Scholars such as Brillantes and Fernandez (2011) argue that while decentralization created opportunities for more responsive governance, the actual implementation has produced uneven results due to weak institutions and enduring patronage systems. Atienza (2006) further emphasizes that local governance success depends on the presence of strong leadership and political will, which are often lacking in areas dominated by entrenched political families. The persistence of clientelism and elite capture has limited the capacity of decentralization to foster genuine democratic accountability and transparency.

Civic engagement, defined by Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) as individual and collective actions aimed at addressing public concerns, is an essential component of a functioning democracy. However, in the Philippine context, civic participation is often restricted to voting during elections, with limited citizen involvement in decision-making processes between electoral cycles. Mendoza et al. (2012) and De Guzman and Reforma (2013) attribute this disengagement to low political efficacy, fear of political backlash, and a general distrust in public institutions. These conditions are further exacerbated by the prevalence of political patronage, wherein access to state resources and services is conditioned on loyalty to political elites, as highlighted by Coronel et al. (2004) and Sidel (1999). Such arrangements discourage independent civic action and undermine public confidence in democratic mechanisms.

One of the most significant barriers to civic engagement in the Philippines is the fear of political retaliation. Citizens who express dissent or criticize political leaders often face threats, exclusion, or loss of livelihood opportunities. Querubin (2016) notes that this fear constrains public discourse and reinforces elite dominance, as many individuals choose self-preservation over political activism. The pervasiveness of political patronage and retaliation creates an

environment of intimidation, especially at the local level where community ties are strong and political actors maintain close control over resources.

The role of youth in governance is another area of concern. While young people represent a substantial demographic in the Philippines, their political participation remains limited. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2018) argues that youth inclusion is critical for fostering innovation and long-term democratic sustainability. However, scholars such as Diokno (2015) and Torres (2014) observe that the Philippine youth are often sidelined in political processes due to inadequate civic education, limited institutional support, and widespread disillusionment with traditional politics. Although structures like the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) were designed to promote youth involvement in governance, these institutions frequently replicate the political behaviors and patronage networks of adult politicians, diminishing their transformative potential.

Political dynasties pose a profound challenge to democratization and inclusive governance in the Philippines. According to Mendoza et al. (2012), areas dominated by political dynasties tend to perform poorly in governance and social development indicators. These families monopolize political power, restrict opportunities for non-dynastic candidates, and perpetuate a culture of political dependence among constituents. Bueza (2019) highlights that over 70% of elected legislators come from political clans, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion that stifles innovation, reform, and citizen-led change. The dominance of dynasties limits democratic competition and fosters environments in which fear, loyalty, and political convenience dictate governance outcomes. To better understand the dynamics at play in local political contexts like Clarin, Bohol, and Cebu City, this study is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Elite Theory and Participatory Governance Theory. Elite Theory, as articulated by scholars such as Hutchcroft (1991) and Coronel (2004), posits that a small group of powerful individuals—often from political dynasties—holds disproportionate control over political and economic resources. These elites shape policy, limit public participation, and preserve their dominance through patronage, coercion, and manipulation of democratic institutions. This framework helps explain how entrenched political families maintain control at the local level despite institutional reforms aimed at democratization.

On the other hand, Participatory Governance Theory emphasizes the importance of inclusive decision-making and active citizen engagement in governance processes. Scholars such as Fung (2006) and Wright (2012) advocate for mechanisms that enable civil society, youth, and marginalized communities to contribute to public policy and governance beyond the ballot box. This perspective offers a normative counterpoint to Elite Theory by highlighting the democratic potential of civic empowerment, institutional transparency, and collaborative governance. When applied together, these frameworks allow for a critical analysis of the tension between elite control and grassroots participation in shaping political outcomes at the local level.

In sum, the literature reveals a complex and often contradictory picture of governance in the Philippines, where formal democratic institutions coexist with informal power networks and elite interests frequently undermine citizen aspirations for reform. What remains underexplored, however, is how these dynamics are experienced, interpreted, and challenged by key local actors such as educators, civil society leaders, and local officials.

This study addresses that gap by providing a grounded, qualitative analysis of governance and civic engagement in two key urban centers in Central Visayas. It contributes to both academic discourse and policy development by highlighting the lived realities of political participation in a context marked by both hope and constraint.

Statement of the problem

The main purpose of this study was to determine the political dynamics, governance practices, and barriers to civic engagement in Clarin, Bohol, and Cebu City, Cebu. Specifically, the study sought answer the following questions.

1. How do local stakeholders, such as educators, government officials, and civil society leaders, perceive the political dynamics and governance practices in Clarin, Bohol, and Cebu City, Cebu?

2. What are the similarities and differences in the governance styles and political cultures between Clarin, Bohol, and Cebu City, Cebu?

3. In what ways do political dynasties influence civic engagement and governance practices in both Clarin and Cebu City?

4. What are the key barriers to civic participation, particularly the fear of political retaliation, as experienced by local stakeholders in both cities?

5. What roles do educators, civil society leaders, and government officials play in maintaining or challenging existing political structures in Clarin and Cebu City?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study employed a mixed-methods design, incorporating structured surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs) as its primary data collection tools. The quantitative component utilized surveys to gather broad insights into participants' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. The qualitative component employed FGDs to provide a deeper exploration of themes that emerged from the survey, adding context and depth to the findings.

The rationale behind this design lies in the complexity of the research topic. Political and civic engagement involves both measurable trends and subjective experiences; thus, combining quantitative and qualitative data allowed for both generalizability and rich contextual analysis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data, while descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were applied to the quantitative dataset, allowing for methodological triangulation and enhanced credibility.

Respondents and locale of the study

The study population consisted of teachers and administrative staff from local educational districts in Clarin, Bohol, and Cebu City, Cebu. Educators were chosen due to their integral roles in community life as informed citizens and potential agents of civic engagement.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met specific criteria: at least two years of professional experience and active involvement in relevant educational or civic programs. This ensured that participants could provide meaningful insights aligned with the study's objectives.

A total of 30 participants were recruited to complete the survey. From this group, 16 individuals were purposefully selected to participate in two FGDs (eight per group), ensuring diversity of perspectives. While this approach enriched the quality of insights gathered, it is acknowledged that the findings are not statistically generalizable to the broader populations of Clarin and Cebu City.

Research instrument

Two research instruments were developed based on the review of relevant literature and expert validation:

Survey Questionnaire: Comprising 25 items across four sections, the survey collected demographic information and included Likert-scale statements (using a 5-point scale) and open-ended questions. These items explored themes such as governance perception, civic participation, and local political challenges. The questionnaire was pilot-tested for clarity, reliability, and content validity.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide: The semi-structured FGD guide facilitated in-depth discussions about participants' experiences, observations, and opinions on political engagement and governance. It included open-ended questions arranged from general to specific to encourage natural dialogue. The guide was also pilot-tested for appropriateness and clarity.

The use of both instruments allowed for comprehensive data collection—quantitative data provided measurable trends, while qualitative data offered depth and explanatory richness.

Data analyses procedure

The data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative procedures:

Quantitative Analysis: Survey data were entered into SPSS for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, standard deviations) were calculated, and inferential tests such as t-tests or ANOVA were used where applicable. Internal consistency of survey scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a benchmark of 0.70 indicating acceptable reliability.

Qualitative Analysis: FGD transcripts were analyzed through thematic analysis. Initial codes were derived from both the research questions and emergent themes. Two researchers independently coded the data, compared results, and resolved discrepancies through discussion. Themes were organized and illustrated with representative quotes to highlight key findings. This dual-mode analysis allowed for data triangulation, enhancing the trustworthiness and depth of the results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative data

Level of political participation

The highest participation rate was observed in electoral voting, with a mean score equivalent to 4.78 on a 5-point scale, indicating strong engagement in formal democratic processes. This suggests that citizens in Clarin, Bohol, and Cebu City fulfill their civic duty by participating in elections. However, participation in attending community meetings and joining civic organizations scored significantly lower, with means around 3.00–3.25. This disparity suggests a limited sustained engagement beyond the act of voting, a trend that aligns with the concept of "electoral democracy," where citizens primarily confine their political involvement to casting ballots but exhibit lower levels of participation in broader participatory governance mechanisms. Several barriers could contribute to this lower engagement, including voter apathy, disillusionment with the political process, a lack of civic education, time and resource constraints, and social or cultural factors.

Perceptions of governance practices

The most frequently chosen response across all aspects of governance was “neutral,” with mean scores ranging from 2.8 to 3.1. This ambivalence among educators, government officials, and civil society leaders reflects a degree of uncertainty or dissatisfaction regarding how governance is practiced in their localities. Specifically, the perception of local government responsiveness to public needs and the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms scored slightly lower, potentially indicating disillusionment or limited trust in bureaucratic processes.

Qualitative data

Political apathy vs. civic responsibility

While the survey results indicate high formal participation in elections, the FGDs revealed an underlying sense of apathy among participants. This suggests that despite fulfilling their right to vote, many feel that their participation does not translate into meaningful political impact or tangible change in their communities. This highlights a potential disjunction between the procedural aspects of democracy, such as voting, and the substantive outcomes that citizens expect from democratic governance.

Governance challenges and patronage politics

The FGDs highlighted a significant concern regarding governance processes, with participants suggesting that patron-client relationships often take precedence over merit-based decision-making, particularly in the awarding of government projects. This practice erodes institutional fairness, inclusivity, and potentially leads to inefficient allocation of resources. This observation aligns with existing studies on political clientelism in the Philippines, which emphasize the enduring influence of patronage networks on governance outcomes.

Civic education and civil society efforts

Despite the identified institutional shortcomings and governance challenges, the FGDs revealed that grassroots actors, particularly civil society leaders, are actively engaged in promoting democratic values and rights-based education within their communities. This highlights the crucial role that civil society organizations (CSOs) play in filling gaps in civic education and empowering citizens with the knowledge necessary for meaningful participation in political processes.

Trust and public accountability

The FGDs highlighted that building public trust in leadership is not solely dependent on campaign promises or pre-election rhetoric but rather on the continuous engagement and visible actions of leaders even after they are elected into office. Participants expressed disappointment with leadership that is perceived as merely performative during election periods rather than genuinely committed to serving the public throughout their term.

CONCLUSIONS

Interpretation from the insights and findings discussed in Chapter 4, several meaningful conclusions emerge that help us better understand the dynamics at play:

1. Electoral participation remains strong, but broader forms of political and civic engagement are underdeveloped. This limits democratic depth at the local level.
2. Governance is perceived with caution, marked by weak accountability and inconsistent responsiveness. This affects citizens' trust and willingness to engage.
3. Leadership trust is conditional on leaders' sustained presence and authenticity. Political detachment post-election contributes to skepticism.
4. Civic engagement is hindered by fear, political fatigue, and limited institutional support, particularly among youth and marginalized groups .
5. Opportunities for democratic renewal exist, especially through civil society, youth empowerment, and digital governance reforms. However, these must be backed by political will and inclusive policy reforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the findings and conclusions of this study:

- A. For Local Government Units (LGUs)
 1. Institutionalize participatory mechanisms such as participatory budgeting , citizen satisfaction surveys, and community scorecards.
 2. Enhance transparency by publishing public budgets, project progress, and performance indicators online and in local bulletin boards .
 3. Establish and strengthen accountability bodies (e.g., internal audit units, citizen oversight boards) that are independent and empowered .
- B. For Civil Society Organizations and Educators
 4. Expand civic education programs in schools and barangays to raise awareness of political rights, civic duties, and democratic values .
 5. Promote intergenerational mentorship by linking experienced civil society leaders with youth volunteers and student groups.
 6. Advocate for legal protections for citizen whistleblowers and activists to mitigate fear of political retaliation.
- C. For Policy Makers and National Agencies
 7. Incentivize LGUs to adopt transparency and participation innovations through recognition programs and financial grants .
 8. Review anti-dynasty and political reform legislation to reduce concentration of power and enable wider citizen participation .
 9. Fund local civic innovation labs that experiment with digital tools (e.g., mobile apps, participatory mapping) for governance.
- D. For Future Researchers
 10. Conduct comparative studies in other regions of the Philippines to assess whether these findings reflect broader national trends .
 11. Explore the role of social media and digital platforms in shaping civic engagement and governance accountability at the local level .

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