

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Beyond the Ballot: Dynasties, Disruptions and Democracy

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The 2025 Philippine Election Results and Political Implications

The 2025 Philippine elections on May 12 witnessed its highest midterm voter turnout of 82.2%, with over 57 million Filipinos casting their votes (COMELEC 2025a). The Senate election results reflect a politically diverse yet polarized composition, with five seats going to candidates associated with the Marcos administration, five seats to pro-Duterte allies, and two seats to liberal opposition leaders. Opposition candidates performed better than expected, signaling a potential shift in voter sentiment and a challenge to the dominance of established political dynasties. In the House of Representatives, the ruling Lakas party maintained its dominance with 104 seats. Most significant at the local level was the landslide victory of former President Rodrigo Duterte, who was re-elected as mayor of Davao City. This was notable since he had been charged and detained by the International Criminal Court for extrajudicial killings (ICC 2025).

The 2025 elections have become a pivotal moment revealing a complex and evolving political landscape, marked by the resurgence of political dynasties, challenges to electoral integrity, and significant implications for the country's democratic trajectory. The electorate's choices indicate both continued support for established political figures and a growing appetite for reform-oriented leadership, particularly among younger voters. Millennials and Gen Z voters comprised approximately 63% of the voting population. They noticeably distanced themselves from the Marcos and Duterte factions¹, and shifted towards reformist candidates advocating for generational preferences such as environmental justice, food security, and youth empowerment. This was reflected in the win of Akbayan as top party list choice, whose campaign effectively mobilized young voters with a message of progressive reform and social justice that appealed to the younger demographic seeking change in the political landscape (Akbayan Party List 2025).

The election results were also significantly influenced by the impeachment proceedings against Vice President Sara Duterte. In February 2025, the House of Representatives impeached her on charges of corruption and threats against the President (House Journal 2025). This will be followed by a Senate impeachment trial in July, which requires a two-thirds majority (16 votes) for conviction and potential disqualification from future office. This turned the Senate race into a crucial referendum on her political future, yielding varied outcomes for both camps. Currently, neither faction has secured an outright majority.

¹ Pulse Asia & SWS Exit Polls. May 2025.

The elections were conducted with relative logistical success, as polling precincts opened on time, vote-counting machines functioned without widespread malfunction, voter turnout was high, results were transmitted swiftly, and the elections were generally peaceful compared to previous elections. The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) demonstrated operational readiness by efficiently deploying technological upgrades with improved cybersecurity safeguards, and civic engagement was evident throughout the process (COMELEC 2025b).

Despite operational successes, significant flaws in democratic integrity have been revealed. Widespread vote buying, online disinformation, entrenched political dynasties, and alleged foreign interference from Chinese-sponsored campaigns compromised the fairness and transparency of the process (ASEAN 2025). These systemic issues erode the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and fall short of international standards on fairness, transparency, and equal political opportunity. A fragile democracy that is susceptible to elite capture, sectarian interests, fragile party systems, and transactional politics is observed. The presence of election monitors offered some oversight, but lasting reform is needed to ensure a level playing field as the country moves toward the 2028 presidential race. This briefing outlines the major issues observed and their broader implications.

Democracy Challenges Observed

1. **Command and Religious Bloc Voting.** The continued influence of command and religious bloc voting, particularly by groups like Iglesia ni Cristo (INC), which reportedly delivered 800,000 to 1.2 million votes (Rappler 2025), poses a serious challenge to democratic integrity. In tight races, these bloc votes can be decisive, not due to a candidate's merit or platform but rather due to sectarian endorsement. This distorts representation, undermines voter autonomy, and blurs the line between church and state. Religious groups acting as political kingmakers raise ethical and constitutional concerns, especially when lesser-known candidates achieve success primarily through sectarian backing.
2. **Entrenched Political Elite, Celebrities and Dynasties.** The majority of Senate seats were won by re-electionists, celebrities and scions of political families (Ateneo School of Government 2025). This suggests that achieving victory is a challenging endeavor for independent candidates. New or non-traditional candidates face insurmountable barriers, shrinking the pool of democratic participation. This reinforces the exclusivity of elite politics, overwhelmingly excluding newcomers who lack name recall or political machinery. The dominance of political families creates a de facto aristocracy, where power is transferred through inheritance rather than through democratic competition. This discourages citizen engagement and undermines the principle of equal representation. It greatly limits the democratic space for genuine political competition, marginalizes independent, grassroots or reformist voices, and undermines the ideal of democracy as a level playing field for all.
3. **Government Aid and Patronage Politics.** Many local candidates relied on patronage networks rooted in dynastic control and clientelist practices to secure votes. These transactions involved the coercive use of state resources, including the withholding of Internal Revenue Allotments (IRAs) and other national funds from Local Government Units (LGUs) based on political loyalty. Such practices prioritize personal alliances over policy and undermine free and fair elections. The distribution of government aid, or *ayuda*, was also used as a vote-buying tool. The European Union Election Observation Mission identified vote-buying as a widespread practice, with *ayuda*

being a common method (European Union 2025). COMELEC received over 400 complaints involving the misuse of aid programs for electoral gain (COMELEC 2025c). Despite a government ban on *ayuda* distribution during the campaign period, enforcement proved difficult, allowing candidates to continue distributing politically motivated giveaways. This highlights the urgent need for stricter rules and enforcement to prevent the politicization of public assistance.

4. **Weak Political Party System and Transactional Alliances.** Elections were dominated by opportunistic alliances and last-minute defections, largely influenced by survey trends rather than policy or ideological commitments (PCIJ 2025). Politicians often align themselves with the winning side, reflecting a bandwagon culture and weakening party discipline. Candidates were often supported for their personal brands rather than coherent platforms, transforming elections into popularity contests. Vague party identities and the absence of clear, issue-based agendas hindered informed voter choice and diluted political accountability. The ambiguity of party platforms revealed the hollow nature of many political parties, which remained personality-driven and loosely organized. This transactional and numbers-focused politics has sidelined principled leadership and long-term vision, undermining democratic discourse as well as the development of programmatic, issue-based politics.

Electoral Reforms Needed to Strengthen Democracy²

To address systemic weaknesses and reinforce democratic governance in the country, the following key reforms are recommended:

1. **Enact Anti-Political Dynasty Legislation:** Prevent the monopolization of political power by entrenched families, by enforcing constitutional provisions against political dynasties. Legislative measures should be implemented to curtail the influence of families in electing officials, thereby fostering inclusivity, fair competition, and political diversity. Opening space for new leaders is essential for the revitalization of representative democracy.
2. **Enhance Campaign Finance Transparency:** Strengthen laws to prevent vote-buying and the illegal funding of campaigns. Implement strict auditing mechanisms, impose meaningful penalties for violations, and ensure public access to campaign finance records to promote transparency and accountability.
3. **Reform the Political Party System:** Encourage the development of platform-based, values-driven parties by providing public financing tied to programmatic goals. In order to curtail political opportunism, it is advisable to implement anti-turncoat laws that discourage party-switching and incentivize issue-based coalition building to foster ideological coherence and party stability.
4. **Empower Civil Society and Promote Civic Education:** Strengthen civil society's involvement in civic education, election monitoring, and voter engagement. Provide NGOs and watchdog groups with adequate resources and legal protections. Initiate a nationwide civic education program in schools and communities to cultivate political literacy, critical thinking, and democratic participation. This program will empower voters with the tools to make independent

² Policy recommendations adapted from electoral reform proposals by NAMFREL, LENTE, and the Institute for Political and Electoral Reform (IPER), 2024–2025.

and informed choices. It is imperative to underscore the significance of ballot secrecy, informed voting, and resistance to disinformation.

5. **Combat Disinformation and Promote Digital Literacy:** Implement strategies to counter disinformation, including fact-checking initiatives, regulation of political advertising on digital platforms, and penalties for coordinated misinformation campaigns. Invest in digital literacy programs to help citizens critically assess online content and make informed electoral choices.
6. **Increase Youth Engagement:** Recognize the growing influence of the youth vote. Future campaigns must prioritize issues that resonate with young voters, such as education, employment, mental health, and digital infrastructure, to sustain their democratic participation and trust in institutions.
7. **Capitalize on Reformist Momentum:** The strong showing of reform-oriented candidates such as Bam Aquino and Kiko Pangilinan signals a renewed public appetite for policy-driven leadership. Their success, along with the impressive performance of independent candidates, reflects a growing willingness among voters to support alternatives outside traditional party structures and entrenched political narratives. Akbayan's electoral win further underscores this shift, indicating a growing demand for progressive representation focused on social justice, transparency, and the welfare of marginalized communities. This reformist momentum presents a vital opportunity to reshape the political landscape. By supporting individuals who are both principle-oriented and performance-driven to enter public service, the focus can shift from patronage to good governance, accountability, and inclusive leadership.

Conclusion

The 2025 elections underscore the significance of democracy beyond the mere act of voting, emphasizing the need for fair competition, transparency, and accountable institutions. While voter turnout remains robust, the persistent influence of sectarian endorsements, patronage networks, and elite dominance reflects a democracy under strain.

To safeguard democratic integrity, urgent reforms are needed: strengthening political party systems, upholding secular governance, and dismantling entrenched dynasties. These measures are essential to restore genuine electoral competition and inclusive political participation.

As the nation looks ahead to the 2028 presidential election, these reforms must be prioritized to prevent further erosion of democratic norms and the consolidation of authoritarian populism cloaked in electoral legitimacy. ■

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