

Beyond the Ballot: A Phenomenological Study of Electors' Political Behavior and Party Patronage

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17189587

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of political patronage on voters' behavior and party loyalty in Mati, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur. Guided by Moustakas' phenomenological framework, it explored the lived experiences of electors through in-depth interviews, focusing on how socio-economic conditions, cultural obligations, and generational perspectives shape electoral decision-making. The findings revealed that political patronage remains deeply embedded in community life, functioning both as a survival mechanism and a cultural practice. Older generations largely normalized patronage as reciprocity, while younger voters, informed by education and social media, increasingly resisted it as a form of corruption. Moreover, material incentives such as cash, goods, and scholarships were found to decisively influence voting, while socio-cultural factors like *utang na loob*, kinship ties, and communal expectations reinforced long-term loyalty. However, loyalty was also shown to be conditional and transactional, weakening when material benefits ceased. The study concludes that patronage politics persists as both a structural and cultural phenomenon, but growing resistance among youth offers potential for democratic renewal. These findings imply the need for reforms that strengthen civic education, enhance transparency, and empower voters to move beyond transactional politics toward value-based electoral participation.

Keywords: Political patronage, Electoral behavior, Party loyalty, Clientelism, Philippine politics

Introduction

Political party patronage, where politicians provide material benefits, services, or favors in exchange for electoral support, plays a significant role in shaping voter behavior, party allegiance, and political participation. The impact of political patronage on voters' decisions is a critical aspect of electoral dynamics. Albrecht (2024) conducted an integrative literature review and qualitative content analysis of 144 scholarly texts from 2000 to 2022, focusing on political patronage and the politicization of bureaucracy. The study highlights that most literature emphasizes political parties as the primary patrons exerting partisan influence over bureaucratic appointments. Albrecht proposes a broader conceptualization that includes other actors such as interested organizations, private companies, and social movements influencing policymaking. The research identifies two main goals of patronage: control-through implementing party policies and building party networks and securing political support or loyalty. Patronage is thus framed not only as a tool for political control but also as a strategy for party-building and resource utilization.

Moustakas' phenomenological approach, rooted in Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, emphasizes structured methodologies to explore lived experiences. His model involves bracketing (setting aside presuppositions), phenomenological reduction (focusing on participants' descriptions), and imaginative variation (identifying invariant themes through perspective shifts) to derive the textural-structural essences of phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). This approach has been applied in various studies, such as cross-cultural transition research examining Saudi students' adaptation to Australian educational contexts, where Moustakas' three-phase framework was used to reveal core themes like identity negotiation and cultural dissonance (Al-Shammari, 2015). Despite philosophical debates regarding the conflation of transcendental subjectivity with empirical consciousness, Moustakas' procedural guidelines remain influential, particularly his iterative analysis process involving invariant constituent validation and cluster thematization through reflexive variation (Moustakas, 1994; Finlay, 2011). Researchers have adapted his methods while addressing limitations through triangulation strategies and external validity checks during thematic synthesis (Creswell, 2013).

Numerous studies have addressed the relationship between political patronage and electoral behavior, shedding light on how patronage affects voter choices. Williams (2015) found that patronage systems are prevalent in various political contexts, significantly influencing electoral outcomes by providing voters with material rewards in exchange for political support. Balbin (2023) highlights that clientelism—a system where politicians offer material goods or services to constituents—remains a key feature of many political systems, particularly in environments with weak party platforms or where voters are not ideologically motivated. Furthermore, Williams (2015) examined how patronage networks impact voter turnout and loyalty, emphasizing that patronage can enhance electoral participation, especially in settings characterized by low levels of political trust. However, much of this research has largely centered on large-scale studies and national-level politics, while there is a limited focus on local contexts or the role of other demographic factors.

Despite the considerable body of work on political patronage, gaps remain in understanding its full impact. First, existing studies often overlook the micro-level analysis of local elections, where patronage may play a more

prominent role in shaping voter behavior. Second, quantitative approaches dominate the literature, leading to a lack of qualitative insights that would better explain how voters perceive and interact with patronage systems. Third, studies often fail to explore how social factors, such as age, gender, and education, mediate the effect of patronage on political behavior. There is also limited research into how patronage influences voter behavior in non-Western or marginalized communities, where political patronage may take different forms.

This study aims to explore the effects of political party patronage on the political behavior of electors. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how patronage-based incentives affect voting decisions, party loyalty, and participation in political processes. By filling gaps in existing literature, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of how patronage systems influence democratic engagement and electoral outcomes, with a focus on local and regional contexts.

Literature Review

This presents the related literature and studies and work of different authors that were considered helpful and valuable in all its different findings.

Political Parties and Philippine Party System

Political parties are a cornerstone of democratic governance, playing a critical role in structuring political competition, organizing government, and channeling the populace's interests into actionable policies. They facilitate political participation, provide ideological direction, and serve as platforms for collective action. However, their capacity to fulfill these roles varies significantly across contexts, shaped by institutional frameworks, historical legacies, and cultural dynamics. This discussion explores the multifaceted nature of political parties, focusing on their functions, challenges, and transnational dimensions, using the references provided. Political parties are often described as the lifeblood of representative democracy. They serve as a conduit between the state and society, enabling the aggregation and articulation of diverse interests.

Scarrow et al. (2017) emphasize that political parties are essential for organizing representation, fostering political participation, and consolidating political power. They provide voters with choices, allowing them to align with parties that reflect their values and policy preferences. Moreover, parties offer a structure through which governments can function effectively, organizing the legislative process and providing coherence to policymaking.

Globally, political parties are also grappling with new challenges, including the rise of populism, polarization, and the impact of technological change on political communication. Bertoli et al. (2019) highlight the role of party ideologies in shaping responses to global issues such as conflict and international relations. These trends suggest that political parties must adapt to a rapidly changing political landscape to remain relevant and effective. The political party system in the Philippines is unique in its combination of fragmentation, patronage, and personality-driven politics.

Kasuya, Y. (2020), President Rodrigo Duterte's administration on the party system became a central theme in the literature. Scholars argued that Duterte's populist style and reliance on personal popularity, rather than traditional party mechanisms, led to the further weakening and fragmentation of the party system. The 2019 midterm elections, in particular, were characterized by the proliferation of new parties claiming allegiance to the president, a decline in the value of party labels, and an "anarchy of parties" where inter-party competition became more fluid and unpredictable than ever before.

Teehankee (2020) describes this system as an "anarchy of parties," where traditional party structures are weak and often serve as vehicles for individual ambitions rather than collective goals.

A growing body of research has examined how Rodrigo Duterte's populist leadership style exploited the weaknesses of the Philippine party system to consolidate personal power. Kasuya and Teehankee (2020) argue that Duterte's presidency led to the further weakening of the party system, resulting in what they term an "anarchy of parties." Traditionally, Philippine presidents relied on their party's patronage networks to coordinate with legislators and achieve policy goals.

Hutchcroft (2020) argues that this fragmentation is not merely a symptom of weak institutions but also a consequence of systemic issues within the electoral framework. The country's multi-party system, combined with its patronage-driven political culture, perpetuates a cycle where parties are formed and dissolved based on political expediency rather than ideological alignment.

This lack of stability undermines the ability of parties to effectively represent their constituencies and hold leaders accountable. In addition to their domestic roles, political parties are increasingly engaging in transnational activities. Burgess and Tyburski (2020) demonstrate how parties leverage extraterritorial voting mechanisms to mobilize diaspora communities.

This is particularly significant in an era of globalization, where the mobility of people across borders necessitates new strategies for political engagement. Such activities expand the influence of political parties and underscore their adaptability in responding to shifting political landscapes. Zederman (2020) provides an insightful case study on Tunisian political parties operating in France, illustrating the complexities of party politics in transnational and authoritarian settings. These parties navigate dual political environments, balancing the expectations of their domestic constituencies with the realities of operating in a foreign political system. Such dynamics are increasingly relevant in a globalized world where political, economic, and social ties transcend national borders.

The challenges facing political parties in many democracies, particularly in the Philippines, underscore the need for systemic reforms. Casiple (2020) advocates for reforms to strengthen party systems, emphasizing the importance of institutionalization in reducing the influence of patronage. Institutional reforms could include measures to enhance party discipline, promote ideological coherence, and reduce the prevalence of party-switching.

These reforms would not only improve the functionality of political parties but also foster greater accountability and representation in the democratic process. Hutchcroft (2020) proposes electoral system redesign as a means to address the fragmentation of the Philippine party system. By adopting reforms such as proportional representation or stricter regulations on party formation, it may be possible to create a more stable and cohesive party landscape. These changes would encourage voters to engage with parties based on their platforms and policies rather than personal or material considerations. Recent events in the Philippines highlight the ongoing challenges faced by political parties.

Teehankee (2020) examines factionalism as a persistent feature of Philippine parties, driven by elite competition and shifting alliances. It highlights how intra-party splits and patronage networks undermine institutionalization, particularly post-2016 under Duterte's populist presidency.

Post-2022, opposition parties such as the Liberal Party (LP) struggled with internal divisions, limiting their ability to counter the Marcos-Duterte alliance. The LP's diminished presence reflected broader challenges in building programmatic coalitions, as traditional patronage-based alliances dominated the political landscape. Meanwhile, the Nationalists Party (NP) and Lakas-CMD consolidated power through strategic alliances with regional blocs.

For example, Sara Duterte's resignation from Lakas-CMD and the migration of lawmakers between parties, as reported by Galvez (2023) and Panti (2023), illustrate the fluidity and instability of the party system. These developments reflect the broader issues of weak institutionalization and patronage-driven politics, which continue to undermine the credibility of political parties.

Philippine party system from 2018 to 2023 reveals a deeply entrenched cycle of weak institutionalization, elite dominance, and patronage-driven politics, exacerbated by systemic flaws and failed reforms. Political parties remain transient vehicles for personal and clan interests, lacking ideological coherence and programmatic platforms, which perpetuate volatility and frequent party-switching. Rodrigo Duterte's populist presidency (2016–2022) further fragmented the system through personalist coalitions, reducing parties to mere labels and fostering an "anarchy of parties" marked by fluid alliances and diminished accountability. Despite legislative efforts to curb party-switching and co-optation of the party-list system, reforms like HB 802 (2019) and SB 2763 (2015) stalled due to elite resistance, allowing dynasties to dominate elections and exploit constitutional mandates. Global pressures, including populism and disinformation, compound these challenges, as seen in social media-driven campaigns that deepen voter disillusionment. Scholars emphasize structural solutions—such as proportional representation, anti-dynasty enforcement, and state subsidies tied to performance—to break the patronage-democracy paradox. However, entrenched elite interests and systemic inertia continue to hinder meaningful institutionalization, leaving Philippine parties trapped in a cycle of instability and unfulfilled democratic potential.

Political Patronage

Political patronage, a practice entrenched in both democratic and authoritarian regimes, refers to allocating public resources, appointments, or benefits in exchange for political loyalty and support. Political leaders often use it to consolidate power, ensure loyalty, and mobilize support. At its core, patronage blurs the boundaries between governance and politics, as decisions about public resource allocation are influenced more by political interests than by merit or public need. Scholars have extensively explored this phenomenon, highlighting its impact on governance, electoral behavior, and institutional structures.

Kopecky et al. (2016) broadly analyze patronage systems in contemporary democracies, examining 22 countries across five regions. Their study underscores the variation in how patronage manifests in different political systems. In some democracies, patronage is overt and embedded in political clientelism, while in others, it is subtler, operating through bureaucratic favoritism.

The study reveals that patronage is not merely a remnant of traditional governance but a persistent feature that shapes modern political institutions. The integration of partisan interests into public administration often fosters inefficiencies and reduces accountability, yet it remains a powerful tool for political consolidation. Saquibal Jr. and Saquibal (2016) analyze the evolution of patronage and dynastic politics in Iloilo City since the post-EDSA period. They argue that patronage has become institutionalized in Philippine politics, shaping voter behavior and electoral outcomes.

Labuschagne (2017) and Mamogale (2017) contextualize patronage within the South African political landscape. They argue that patronage, when unchecked, can lead to state capture and economic inefficiencies. Labuschagne discusses how patronage networks in South Africa have transitioned the state from a weak but functional entity to a dysfunctional one. Mamogale, on the other hand, highlights the role of patronage in shaping the country's economic performance, revealing the detrimental effects of politically motivated resource allocation. Similarly, Panizza et al (2019) propose a typology of patronage appointments based on roles, trust, and skills. Their research delves into how patronage is justified through narratives of trustworthiness and competency, even when appointments are politically motivated. They argue that these justifications enable the normalization of patronage practices in governance, which complicates efforts to promote meritocratic systems.

Driscoll (2018) investigates the relationship between political competition and patronage. His study posits that heightened competition among political elites often leads to an increase in patronage as leaders seek to secure and expand their support bases.

This escalation of patronage can strain public resources and weaken institutional integrity. Gray (2018) extends the analysis of patronage to the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, where the practice is deeply entrenched in political culture. In these contexts, patronage serves as a stabilizing mechanism for autocratic regimes, enabling rulers to maintain their grip on power through the strategic distribution of resources and opportunities. This practice, however, also fosters dependency and limits political participation.

The study of Tadić and Elbasani (2018) examines the role of patronage networks in post-war Kosovo. Their study reveals how political parties exploit public institutions to consolidate their power, undermining efforts at state-building. Patronage networks in Kosovo are deeply embedded in the bureaucracy, making reform efforts challenging and perpetuating a cycle of inefficiency and corruption.

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In the Philippines, patronage is a defining feature of political culture, deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. Kreuzer (2020) examines the enduring public support for President Rodrigo Duterte, attributing it to his ability to deliver tangible benefits through patronage. This system aligns with Filipino values such as *loob* (inner self) and *kapwa* (shared identity), which frame patronage as a reciprocal relationship between patrons and their clients.

The cultural acceptance of patronage reinforces its persistence in Filipino politics. Jiang and Zhang (2020) explore patronage networks within the context of distributive politics in China. Their findings show that patronage enables political elites to channel resources selectively to regions or individuals who demonstrate unwavering loyalty to the ruling party. This creates a feedback loop of loyalty and reward, reinforcing the dominance of patronage networks. The authors highlight that while such systems may ensure political stability in the short term, they often hinder equitable resource distribution and long-term developmental goals.

Brierley (2021) examines the interplay between merit and patronage in public sector recruitment. Her research suggests that hybrid models, which incorporate both patronage and merit-based systems, can balance political loyalty with administrative efficiency. However, she cautions that the presence of patronage often undermines the principles of fairness and inclusivity in recruitment processes.

Arugay and Li (2022) explore patronage politics in Caloocan City, emphasizing the role of national linkages and political brokerage in sustaining dynastic rule. Their study highlights the strategic use of patronage to balance political interests and maintain control over electoral outcomes.

Similarly, Cuarteros (2022) examines the intersection of patronage and religious affiliations in Bacolod City, particularly the influence of the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) in shaping political dynamics. Montemar and Teehankee (2022) provide insights into how patronage structures urban governance in Manila, focusing on the role of political brokerage in mayoral elections. Their research illustrates how political elites leverage patronage to secure voter loyalty and consolidate their power in urban centers.

Patronage remains a pervasive and adaptive feature of contemporary political systems, shaping governance, electoral behavior, and institutional integrity across diverse contexts. Studies such as Kopecky et al. (2016) demonstrate that patronage varies widely, from overt clientelism to subtle bureaucratic favoritism, and is not merely a remnant of traditional governance but a persistent mechanism for political consolidation. In the Philippines, patronage is deeply institutionalized, influencing voter behavior and reinforcing dynastic politics, as shown by Saquibal Jr. and Saquibal (2016), Kreuzer (2020), Arugay and Li (2022), and others. Similar dynamics are observed in South Africa, where unchecked patronage has led to state dysfunction and economic inefficiencies (Labuschagne 2017; Mamogale 2017), and in post-war Kosovo, where entrenched patronage networks hinder state-building (Tadić and Elbasani 2018). Research by Panizza et al. (2019) and Brierley (2021) highlights how patronage is often justified through narratives of trust and competency, complicating efforts to promote meritocracy. Meanwhile, in the Gulf monarchies and China, patronage serves as a stabilizing force for regimes but fosters dependency and limits equitable resource distribution (Gray 2018; Jiang and Zhang 2020). Across these cases, the strategic use of patronage to secure loyalty and control electoral outcomes perpetuates cycles of dependency, undermines meritocratic principles, and reduces accountability, illustrating its enduring influence on both governance and political culture.

Electors and Electoral Reforms

The effect of political party patronage on electors' political behavior is a multidimensional issue influenced by various social, political, and cultural factors. Electoral behavior in foreign contexts is shaped by institutional structures, historical precedents, and the specific forms of electoral malpractice.

Political patronage, when unchecked, fosters dependency and constrains electors' ability to freely express their political will. The Institute for Political and Electoral Reform (2015) noted that Filipino voters often base their choices on personality-driven politics rather than issue-based platforms. This tendency is further exploited by political patronage, where financial or social support from parties dictates voter allegiance. Consequently, this scenario reflects a broader challenge in the country's democratic process, where patronage erodes the legitimacy of free and fair elections.

Moreover, Norris et al. (2015) utilized a global survey to measure perceptions of electoral integrity, revealing that voters in nations with lower electoral transparency are more susceptible to political party patronage. This susceptibility leads to a cycle where political allegiance is dictated by material benefits rather than ideological alignment. This studies emphasize the detrimental effects of political patronage on democratic engagement and electoral integrity in the Philippines.

In Ukraine, Tkachenko and Halling (2017) analyzed the prospects of electoral reform, noting how systemic corruption and patronage have entrenched political behavior among voters. They argued that structural reforms aimed at reducing the influence of powerful political families and parties could help restore voter independence.

Cruz et al (2017) study examined the role of political family networks in shaping electoral outcomes. Their study confirmed that political party patronage perpetuates dynastic politics, creating a scenario where electors vote not for ideological reasons but due to longstanding relationships and the promise of material rewards.

The breach of Philippine electoral records in 2016, as reported by The Guardian, exacerbated concerns about the manipulation of electors through data exploitation. This incident illustrates how modern vulnerabilities, combined with traditional patronage practices, impact electoral integrity and voter behavior.

De Kadt (2019) discussed how improving electoral accessibility can boost voter turnout, but this also increases the vulnerability of electors to political party patronage. In regions with high poverty levels, like the Philippines, political parties capitalize on the material needs of voters, creating an uneven playing field.

Additionally, Meier et al. (2019) highlighted bureaucratic failures in governance, which indirectly fuel patronage politics. When public institutions fail to deliver services effectively, voters rely on political parties for assistance, thus reinforcing the cycle of dependency and patron-client relationships.

The International IDEA (2021) underscores the need for electoral management bodies to educate electors on the importance of informed voting and to enforce measures that prevent patronage-driven politics. This approach highlights how voter education campaigns can counteract the negative impact of patronage. In the Philippine context, political behavior is deeply intertwined with familial ties, economic dependence, and traditional political structures. Anabo (2021) analyzed student voters' preferences, revealing that political patronage significantly influences their electoral decisions. Attributes such as familial networks and financial incentives outweigh policy platforms in determining voting behavior.

Lao and Rivera's (2023) analysis of electoral reforms from 1972 to 2022 contextualizes voter engagement within the Philippines' post-authoritarian democratization efforts, emphasizing how institutional inertia and elite dominance perpetuate cycles of patronage-driven elections. Their work aligns with Teehankee's critiques (e.g., *An Anarchy of Parties*, 2023) of weak party institutionalization and presidential dominance, which undermine programmatic politics and enable dynastic rule.

Similarly, The Carter Center's 2022 election report details persistent challenges in COMELEC's autonomy and capacity, such as partisan appointments and delayed adjudication of disqualification cases, which erode public trust—a key concern in Lao and Rivera's institutional analysis.

BTI Project's 2024 Philippines report further contextualizes these issues, noting how patronage networks and disinformation campaigns exploit weak voter education, a problem Lao and Rivera identify as central to sustaining dependency on elite-driven politics. Together, these studies underscore the Philippines' struggle to transcend its "electoral paradox," where democratic exercises coexist with entrenched authoritarian legacies.

Hegre et al. (2024), which utilizes machine learning to predict electoral violence in upcoming elections, revealing elevated risks particularly in nations with a history of such violence and even in established democracies like the United States. Another important work is by Birch and Muchlinski (2024), focusing on the implications of electoral integrity and the role of international agencies in promoting peaceful elections, emphasizing the need for data-driven approaches to mitigate risks.

Additionally, research published in *Electoral Studies* by Coppedge et al. (2024) analyzes the impact of electoral systems on voter turnout and engagement, suggesting that proportional representation may enhance participation rates compared to majoritarian systems.

A study by Mechkova et al. (2024) looks into digital vulnerabilities during elections, highlighting how misinformation campaigns can influence voter perceptions and outcomes. Lastly, Pew Research Center's analysis (2024) examines voter sentiments leading up to the 2024 U.S. elections, noting significant divisions among voters regarding the acceptance of election results, which could impact electoral stability.

The literature demonstrates that electors' political behavior is heavily influenced by political party patronage in both international and Philippine contexts. Political patronage deeply influences voter behavior and weakens electoral integrity in the Philippines. Despite international standards calling for impartial electoral frameworks, voters—especially in poorer communities—often prioritize material benefits and personal ties over policy or ideology. Patronage practices, such as vote buying and distribution of government aid timed around elections, reinforce dependency and dynastic politics, undermining free and fair elections. Efforts like voter education show limited success due to entrenched poverty, weak institutions, and digital vulnerabilities that facilitate manipulation and disinformation. Overall, patronage sustains a transactional political culture that challenges democratic accountability and meaningful voter participation in the country.

Political Behavior and Electors

Political behavior encompasses all activities associated with governance and decision-making, from voting and campaigning to more informal forms of political engagement such as discussions and demonstrations.

Elbanna, Thanos, and Papadakis (2014) emphasized the importance of contextual variables in shaping political behavior, particularly in strategic decision-making processes. Their research highlights how cultural norms, organizational structures, and external pressures influence political actions and decisions.

In the context of political party patronage, these variables play a crucial role in determining how resources are allocated and how voters respond to such allocations. For instance, in societies where familial and communal ties are strong, patronage often takes the form of localized benefits, such as infrastructure projects or social services, that directly impact voters' daily lives. These benefits create a sense of obligation and loyalty, further entrenching the patronage system as a cornerstone of political behavior.

Nalipay, Bernardo, and Mordeno (2016) explored the psychological dimensions of political behavior in the Philippine context, emphasizing the role of social complexity beliefs in shaping voter trust and loyalty. Their findings suggest that voters are more likely to support leaders who they perceive as capable of navigating complex challenges, a perception often cultivated through patronage-driven narratives.

According to Ferris et al. (2017), political behavior is profoundly shaped by social influence and organizational dynamics. They suggest that power, influence, and reciprocity networks within organizations and political systems contribute significantly to shaping how individuals behave politically. These dynamics often manifest in patronage systems, where resources are distributed strategically to secure voter loyalty.

Ferris and colleagues further highlight that political behavior is not merely about individual choice but also involves group dynamics, where loyalty and trust within a network significantly impact decision-making. This concept aligns with the theory of political party patronage, which emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining reciprocal relationships between voters and political actors.

Ancic, Baketa, and Kovacic (2019) explored the role of class in shaping political behavior, noting that socioeconomic status remains a primary determinant of political preferences. Their study in Croatia revealed that individuals often align their political affiliations with parties that they perceive to advocate for their economic interests. Political parties, in turn, use patronage to secure the loyalty of these groups, tailoring their strategies to resonate with the needs of specific classes.

For instance, parties may focus on offering tangible benefits, such as jobs, financial assistance, or access to public services, to low-income voters. Such practices not only reinforce class-based voting patterns but also entrench the system of patronage as a central mechanism in electoral politics. The interplay between class and patronage underscores the significance of economic dependency in shaping political behavior, particularly in developing democracies where socioeconomic inequalities are pronounced.

In multilevel systems, political parties act as intermediaries, channeling resources and influence between higher-level authorities and local constituencies. This mediation often takes the form of patronage, where resources are distributed strategically to maintain voter loyalty and secure electoral success. The study emphasizes that patronage is not merely a tactic for resource allocation but also a tool for managing voter perceptions and expectations in complex political environments. Interpersonal communication is a critical factor in understanding political behavior, particularly in the context of election campaigns.

Mancosu (2019) explored how communication among peers influences voting decisions, revealing that these interactions often serve to reinforce existing political preferences or create new ones. This dynamic is particularly relevant in systems dominated by political party patronage, where grassroots networks play a pivotal role in spreading influence.

Braun, Gross, and Rittberger (2020) examined political behavior within the context of multilevel governance, particularly in the European Union. Their findings highlight how the complexity of governance structures, involving multiple layers of decision-making, affects voter behavior. In such systems, political parties often rely on patronage to navigate these complexities, ensuring that voters remain aligned with their objectives across different levels of governance.

Christensen and Moynihan (2020) investigated the phenomenon of motivated reasoning among politicians and its impact on voter behavior. They found that politicians often resist information that challenges their decisions, relying instead on party loyalty and patronage networks to maintain support. This resistance is mirrored in voter behavior, where individuals are often swayed by the tangible benefits provided through patronage rather than by policy debates or ideological considerations.

This phenomenon highlights a key aspect of political party patronage: its ability to create a sense of dependency among voters. By distributing resources and benefits, parties establish a narrative that emphasizes their indispensability, thereby shaping voter perceptions and behaviors.

Christensen and Moynihan's work suggests that patronage is not just a political strategy but a psychological tool that reinforces loyalty through tangible and intangible means.

In the Philippines, political behavior is heavily influenced by personality-driven politics and patronage systems. Nai, Maier, and Vranić (2021) highlighted the role of candidate personality traits in shaping voter preferences, noting that charisma and perceived likeability often outweigh policy considerations. This dynamic is reinforced by patronage, which creates direct, personal ties between voters and political actors.

The London School of Economics (LSE) Political Behaviour Group (2023) has focused on public opinion, voting, and intergroup relations, employing methods like randomized experiments and text-as-data analysis to explore global political trends. GESIS (2024) has contributed through the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), analyzing voter attitudes, electoral participation, and the influence of social media on political parties across 60 countries.

A workshop organized by the European University Institute (2024) emphasized empirical studies on political behavior in Central and Eastern Europe, with a focus on public opinion, elections, and intergroup dynamics using quantitative and mixed methods. The University of Bologna's course on political behavior (2024) explored democratic backsliding, populism, and polarization, integrating case studies from various democracies.

Barcelona DEC Workshop (2024) brought together scholars to discuss cutting-edge research on political behavior and public opinion, fostering collaboration among experts in the field.

Political behavior in the context of political party patronage is shaped by cultural norms, social networks, and socioeconomic status. Patronage fosters loyalty through localized benefits and personal ties, especially in communities with strong familial or communal bonds. Voters often support leaders perceived as capable of managing complex challenges, a perception reinforced by patronage narratives. Economic dependency leads lower-income groups to favor parties offering tangible benefits, deepening class-based voting patterns. Additionally, interpersonal communication and group dynamics strengthen these loyalties. Patronage also personalizes politics, where candidate charisma often outweighs policy considerations. Overall, patronage remains a powerful mechanism that sustains voter dependency and shapes political behavior across diverse contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a Phenomenological-Qualitative Research Design, which is appropriate for examining complex social realities by deeply analyzing non-numerical data such as interviews, observations, and texts. The primary aim of this design is to capture the meaning and context of human experiences rather than to generate statistical generalizations. Under this broad qualitative approach, the phenomenological method, specifically Moustakas' framework, was utilized to reveal the essence of lived experiences.

Moustakas' approach systematically guides the researcher through processes of data reduction, clustering, and synthesis, ultimately leading to interpretive descriptions that capture the shared meanings participants ascribe to their experiences. Central to this method is its participant-centered orientation, ensuring that the voices of individuals are prioritized while the researcher practices epoche—the suspension of biases—to approach the phenomenon with openness and neutrality. Through this rigorous process, the study aims to provide a holistic and authentic understanding of how political party patronage influences the electoral behavior of voters.

Research Environment

The research was conducted in Mati, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur, chosen as the site due to its socio-political context and relevance to the study. Mati, located in the 2nd congressional district of Zamboanga del Sur, has a population of approximately 1,705 (2020 Census), which makes it a manageable yet diverse community for qualitative inquiry. Its history and exposure to political patronage systems make it an ideal setting for examining how local dynamics, relationships, and networks shape political loyalty and decision-making.

The barangay's accessibility further facilitated the collection of qualitative data, enabling in-depth interviews and community engagement. Findings from this study in Mati are expected to contribute to the broader understanding of Philippine politics, particularly how patronage operates in rural communities and affects democratic participation.

Research Participants

The study involved eight participants from Mati, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur. Selection criteria required that participants:

1. Had actively participated in at least two election cycles,
2. Had received tangible benefits such as jobs or contracts from political parties, or
3. Had demonstrated strong affiliation with a particular political party.

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms (P1–P8) were assigned. Participants included:

- P1 Adriana, a J&T employee, JHCSC graduate (BA English Language Studies)
- P2 James, a barangay captain, college graduate
- P3 Joana, J&T employee, BA English Language Studies graduate
- P4 Ain, JHCSC student
- P5 Myrna, 47 years old, Grade 5 education
- P6 David, JHCSC student
- P7 Adrian, 22 years old, JHCSC student
- P8 Erica, JHCSC student and J&T employee

This group represented a diverse mix of age, occupation, and educational backgrounds, providing varied perspectives on political patronage and voting behavior.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used was an interview guide containing both open-ended and close-ended questions aligned with the study's objectives. Questions were designed to elicit participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and observations regarding political party patronage, particularly during recent elections.

To ensure accuracy and completeness, interviews were audio-recorded using smartphones. Transcription was later conducted, and statements in local dialects were translated into English for consistency and clarity in analysis.

Sampling Technique

The study employed Non-Probability Purposive Sampling, which allowed the researchers to deliberately select individuals who met the inclusion criteria and could provide rich, relevant data. This method prioritized depth of insight over generalizability, consistent with the phenomenological nature of the study. By selecting participants with varied but relevant experiences, the research ensured a wide spectrum of perspectives on how patronage influences electoral behavior.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection followed a systematic process:

1. Preparation – Consent forms, interview guides, and small tokens of appreciation were prepared before fieldwork.
2. Recruitment – Researchers began at the barangay hall, the recognized center of authority, and extended to nearby households to identify qualified participants.
3. Informed Consent – Participants were briefed about the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw. Signed consent was obtained before interviews.
4. Interview Process – Each participant underwent an individual in-depth interview consisting of 20 questions, lasting about 1.5 hours, conducted on May 27–28.
5. Recording and Transcription – All sessions were recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

This approach ensured ethical compliance, participant trust, and comprehensive data collection.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis integrated with Moustakas' modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, a structured approach for phenomenological studies. The analytic process involved several stages:

1. Epoche – Researchers bracketed personal biases to ensure objectivity.
2. Horizontalization – All significant statements were treated with equal value.
3. Meaning Units – Statements were clustered into meaning units representing the essence of participants' experiences.
4. Subthemes and Themes – Meaning units were synthesized into subthemes and main themes, emerging inductively from the data.
5. Textural Descriptions – Detailed accounts of what participants experienced.
6. Structural Descriptions – Explanations of how the experiences occurred within specific contexts.
7. Composite Description – Integration of all accounts into a collective essence of the phenomenon.

Through this method, the study systematically captured both individual variations and shared meanings, highlighting how personal circumstances—such as age, socio-economic status, or community role—shaped participants' interpretations of political patronage.

Result and Discussion

This presents the findings based on the lived experiences of participants from Mati, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur. The focus is on how political patronage shapes voting behavior, as guided by Moustakas' phenomenological framework. Responses from participants are emphasized, and their insights reveal the complex dynamics of patronage and electoral decision-making.

Influence of political patronage to voters' political behavior

Table 1

Themes emerged in the Influence of political patronage to voters' political behavior in terms of Demographic factors

Theme	Subtheme
1. Socio-economic vulnerability as a driver of political patronage	1.1 Dependence on Government Aid Influences Voting Behavior 1.2 Vote-Buying as a Common Practice in Marginalized Communities 1.3 Campaign Promises as Temporary Relief for the Poor 1.4 Low Educational Attainment and Political Awareness 1.5 Resistance to Patronage Despite Poverty

2. Age and generational outlooks on Patronage

2.1 Old generations and traditional Acceptance

2.2 Younger generation and Emerging Resistance

The findings highlight that political patronage remains a pervasive influence in shaping voters' political behavior, with demographic factors such as socio-economic status and age playing a decisive role. Two overarching themes emerged: (1) Socio-economic vulnerability as a driver of political patronage and (2) Age and generational outlooks on patronage. Together, these themes reveal that material dependency and historical political culture intersect to sustain patron-client relationships in rural communities, while new forms of resistance are gradually emerging among younger generations.

Theme 1: Socio-economic vulnerability as a driver of political patronage

Demographic factors, especially socio-economic vulnerability, significantly influence how political patronage operates in shaping voter behavior. Individuals from lower-income backgrounds often face urgent material needs—such as access to scholarships, social welfare programs like 4Ps (Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program), and infrastructure projects. Politicians exploit this vulnerability by offering these benefits in exchange for political support, creating a transactional relationship between voters and politicians.

Dependence on Government Aid Influences Voting Behavior

"We're farmers, and at the same time we also participate in Women's Day activities. We are beneficiaries of the 4Ps program, which really helps us in our daily needs. When it comes to politics, we just observe what the politicians do and listen to their promises, since their support matters to us." - P5

This highlights the respondent's economic vulnerability—being a farmer with limited formal education and dependent on government aid like 4Ps. Their passive political stance ("just observe and listen") reflects how socio-economic hardship can lead to disengagement from active decision-making, making them more susceptible to politicians who promise continued aid.

"Scholarship programs offered by politicians have helped us, and because of this, we were influenced to support them. Education became possible for our family because of such assistance." - P4

This shows how access to education, especially through scholarships linked to politicians, is used as a political tool. In economically challenged communities, educational opportunities become transactional, with beneficiaries feeling compelled to support politicians in return.

"Sometimes, the relief goods we receive during calamities come from politicians. Because of that, we feel indebted, and when election season arrives, we tend to support them as a way of showing gratitude." — P6

This underscores how emergency aid creates a sense of obligation that translates into political loyalty, showing how vulnerabilities during crises are capitalized on.

"Livelihood programs given by the government are important for us who have unstable incomes. Politicians who bring these projects influence our choice because our families benefit directly from their initiatives." — P2

Here, livelihood support becomes tied to political preference, reinforcing how basic survival needs drive community members toward patron-client relationships.

"Even small cash assistance or medical help from politicians affects us. We may not ask for it, but when they extend a hand, it feels like we owe them our votes in return." — P7

This illustrates how even minimal forms of assistance, when framed as favors from politicians, foster dependency and reciprocal support during elections.

Dependence on Government Aid Influences Voting Behavior illustrates how access to education, healthcare, and livelihood programs—often mediated by politicians—creates an implicit obligation among voters. Similar patterns were observed in Jiang and Zhang's (2020) study of China, where patronage networks shaped distributive politics, especially among economically vulnerable groups. These findings also align with Brierley's (2021) argument that the intertwining of patronage and merit in public service delivery produces both dependence and loyalty, weakening the prospects of programmatic politics.

Vote-Buying as a Common Practice in Marginalized Communities

This reflects how promises of material benefits during campaigns are used to win votes, especially in economically vulnerable communities. Despite the lack of follow-through, voters may continue this cycle because of their immediate needs and lack of alternatives.

"One of the reasons why people become confused or blinded in making political choices is because of vote-buying, which primarily happens due to the influence of money." - P4

This directly ties political behavior to economic needs. The use of money in campaigns causes voters to overlook candidates' competence or integrity, showing how financial vulnerability can distort democratic decision-making.

"In my experience, the influence of money has become very significant in choosing candidates today, as money often determines how voters make their decisions." - P2

As a barangay captain, P2 observes that money has become central to political decision-making, especially among the poor. Even small amounts can sway voters, showing how low-income voters are more easily influenced by material offers than long-term platforms or integrity.

"People in our barangay sometimes accept money from politicians because they feel it is their only chance to benefit from leaders, even if they know that promises will not be fulfilled." - P6

This shows how poverty conditions normalize the practice of taking money, with voters rationalizing it as an immediate gain rather than expecting long-term development.

"It is common during elections that families receive cash or goods like rice and groceries, and many people see this as part of the campaign process." - P7

Such practices illustrate how patronage politics has become embedded in community culture, where material incentives are expected and accepted as a standard exchange during elections.

"Even though people understand that money from candidates is temporary, they still accept it because their daily needs are more pressing than political promises." - P5

This reflects how economic hardships shape voter priorities, forcing them to value short-term material relief over long-term governance reforms.

Vote-Buying as a Common Practice emphasizes the normalization of cash or goods distribution during campaigns. Respondents described vote-buying as both expected and accepted, reflecting Driscoll's (2018) claim that increased political competition heightens patronage practices as candidates seek to secure support. In the Philippine context, Arugay and Li (2022) also note that dynastic and machine politics thrive on material inducements, further entrenching clientelism.

Campaign Promises as Temporary Relief for the Poor

"Before the election, politicians make many promises to help the people, but after they win, they do not carry out what they said." - P8

This reflects the gap between campaign pledges and actual post-election actions. Politicians often design promises to address the immediate needs of poor and marginalized communities, such as food distribution, livelihood support, or infrastructure projects. Yet, after gaining power, these commitments are neglected, underscoring how such promises function as manipulative strategies rather than sincere developmental efforts.

"They assure us of scholarships and livelihood programs during their campaign, but once they are in position, only a chosen few actually benefit while the majority are left out." - P5

Here, the participant highlights the selective implementation of promised programs, suggesting that benefits are reserved for political allies or supporters. Such practices reinforce dependency and favoritism, leaving the broader community disillusioned.

"Politicians tell us that they will improve our roads and health centers, but when the election is over, no improvements are ever started or completed." - P3

This reveals how promises of infrastructure and public services are often used as political bait. For communities in need of basic facilities, such unfulfilled promises deepen frustration and perpetuate a cycle of neglect and false hope.

"They promise to provide subsidies and assistance to lower our daily expenses, but these are only distributed during campaign season and quickly disappear afterwards." – P7

This statement reflects how short-term material relief—such as food packs, cash allowances, or fare subsidies—is used as a temporary lifeline during elections. Once votes are secured, the relief disappears, exposing the opportunistic nature of patronage politics.

"We are told that jobs will be created for ordinary people, but in reality, only their relatives or loyal supporters are given these opportunities while the rest of us remain unemployed." – P2

This captures the exclusivity of benefits tied to political loyalty. Job creation pledges, often a central campaign promise, rarely reach the wider population and instead reinforce favoritism, further marginalizing the poor who were initially enticed by such commitments.

Campaign Promises as Temporary Relief further demonstrates how short-term pledges are strategically used to address immediate needs but often fail to translate into lasting improvements. This reflects Gray's (2018) theorization that patronage functions less as genuine redistribution and more as a mechanism of political control. Respondents' disappointment with unfulfilled promises underscores Meier et al.'s (2019) critique of the failures of democratic governance under clientelist arrangements.

Low Educational Attainment and Political Awareness

"I only reached Grade 5 because we had to work at an early age, and most of my time was spent planting and harvesting crops." – P5

This reflects how limited education can hinder political awareness and restrict opportunities for critical engagement with governance issues. Without higher levels of schooling, many voters rely more on immediate, tangible support than on analyzing long-term policies or platforms.

"Because I did not finish school, I do not fully understand the programs that politicians discuss, so I just depend on what they give us during the campaign." – P2

This statement highlights how limited schooling creates a dependency on short-term incentives instead of informed decision-making. Political messages are often reduced to material benefits rather than meaningful discussions of development.

"Since I only reached elementary, I find it difficult to understand campaign speeches, and I usually follow what my relatives or neighbors advise." – P7

Here, the participant explains how educational gaps contribute to a reliance on others' opinions in voting decisions, which in turn reinforces collective voting shaped by patronage.

"I stopped going to school because of poverty, and now I often believe the promises of politicians since I do not know how to check if they are really true." – P3

These points to the vulnerability of less-educated voters to manipulation. Without access to critical tools of evaluation, they become easier targets for empty promises.

"Because I did not finish high school, I usually think of the small help we receive during elections as already a big thing, even if it does not last." – P6

This demonstrates how limited education shapes priorities toward immediate relief instead of sustainable development, thereby strengthening the grip of patronage politics.

Low Educational Attainment and Political Awareness highlights the role of education in shaping political engagement. Respondents with limited schooling reported difficulty in evaluating political platforms, often defaulting to tangible incentives. Ančić, Baketa, and Kovačić (2019) similarly found that class and education strongly correlate with political behavior, with lower-educated voters more likely to prioritize immediate material benefits. This finding also resonates with Mancosu's (2019) argument that interpersonal influence—rather than critical policy analysis—often shapes voting decisions in communities with limited educational resources.

Resistance to Patronage Despite Poverty

"In my way of choosing a candidate, I do not accept money because I believe that my vote is not for sale." – P6

This highlights how some voters, despite being poor, actively resist the lure of patronage politics. The participant stresses personal integrity and a principled stance against vote-buying.

"Even if we are struggling financially, I do not take money from politicians because I want to vote based on conscience." – P4

This shows how values and ethical considerations can outweigh economic pressures, illustrating resistance to clientelism.

"I reject offers of food and cash during elections because I believe that politicians should serve us sincerely, not just when they need our votes." – P7

Here, the participant emphasizes the expectation of genuine governance rather than transactional politics, despite the temptation of material relief.

"Although we live in poverty, I tell my family not to accept money from candidates because it will only bind us to them without real change." – P3

This illustrates an awareness of the dangers of dependency and the desire to break the cycle of patronage at the family level.

"I prefer to support a candidate based on their platform and not on the money they give, because I want my vote to contribute to real development." – P2

This statement reveals a more conscious form of political engagement that rejects transactional exchanges in favor of long-term governance outcomes.

Interestingly, not all participants accepted patronage. Resistance to Patronage Despite Poverty reveals that some voters maintain a principled rejection of transactional politics, choosing instead to base their decisions on conscience and candidate platforms. Such agency reflects Finlay's (2011) insight that phenomenological inquiry often uncovers not just dominant structures but also acts of resistance within them. In the Philippine setting, Casiple (2020) underscores the importance of nurturing such civic independence to strengthen democratic institutions against patronage-driven politics.

The narratives reveal that voters in lower-income households are particularly susceptible to patronage, given their reliance on government aid and other forms of material support. Respondents who depended on programs such as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) or scholarships expressed feelings of indebtedness toward politicians, reinforcing a transactional relationship where votes are exchanged for goods and services. This resonates with Cruz, Labonne, and Querubín's (2017) findings that material benefits provided by political elites often translate into electoral support, especially in marginalized communities.

Theme 2: Age and Generational Outlooks on Patronage

Age shapes how people view political patronage, with older generations often treating it as a familiar and accepted part of politics, while younger generations are beginning to challenge and resist it. This theme explores how different age groups perceive, justify, or reject patronage practices, reflecting both continuity and transformation in the political culture of communities.

Older Generations and Traditional Acceptance

"For us elders, it has always been this way—politicians come during elections bringing money, food, or goods, and in return, it is expected that we support them with our votes... We see this not as bribery, but as part of the cycle we have grown used to for many years." – P1

This statement shows how senior voters often perceive patronage as an ordinary exchange rather than corruption. Having experienced decades of elections where gift-giving was normalized, older generations interpret it as a natural part of the electoral process and even as a form of reciprocity.

"When I was still young, I witnessed how my parents accepted small amounts of money or rice from candidates, and as I grew older, I naturally learned to do the same. For us, this is not something unusual, because it has been passed on from one election to another like a custom." – P4

Here, the participant describes how patronage is transmitted through social learning. The practice is reinforced by parental influence, which makes it appear less like political manipulation and more like tradition. This intergenerational acceptance sustains the cycle of patronage politics.

"We consider the ayuda or small cash gifts that politicians give as blessings, especially for families like ours who are struggling financially. Because of this, many of us do not feel guilty about supporting them—it is only fair to return their kindness by voting for them." - P3

This account reveals how patronage is framed in moral and cultural terms, interpreted as generosity rather than exploitation. For older voters, especially those facing hardship, politicians' gifts are seen as forms of assistance that deserve reciprocity through votes.

"For us elders, it is not unusual to accept what candidates give because this has been practiced in every election since long ago. To refuse would almost feel strange, because it is already an expected part of election season in the community." - P6

The participant emphasizes how deeply embedded patronage is in local political culture. Rather than questioning it, older voters often see refusal as deviance from tradition, reinforcing its persistence in every electoral cycle.

"We have become so used to politicians handing out money, rice, or other goods before elections that many older people like us no longer see anything wrong with it. For us, it is simply the way politics works, and refusing to accept would feel like missing an opportunity." - P8

This statement underscores how normalization reduces moral concerns. Patronage is accepted not only because of need, but also because of the perception that it is a standard feature of politics—something one would be unwise to reject.

Older Generations and Traditional Acceptance underscores how patronage has been normalized across decades of electoral cycles. Respondents described gift-giving not as bribery but as an expected practice deeply embedded in community life. This aligns with Hicken's (2014) observation that the weakness of party institutionalization in the Philippines perpetuates reliance on clientelist exchanges. Albrecht (2024) similarly emphasizes that patronage systems are not only sustained by political elites but also reinforced by voters' cultural acceptance, which frames material benefits as legitimate forms of reciprocity.

Younger Generations and Emerging Resistance

"I feel that it is wrong to accept money from politicians because it means giving away not only my vote, but also my future. If I allow myself to be bought, I lose the chance to choose leaders who can truly improve our lives." - P2

This statement highlights the growing awareness among young voters about the long-term consequences of patronage. Unlike older generations who frame it as reciprocity, the younger perspective connects patronage to a betrayal of democratic choice and future development.

"Our generation is more aware now because of social media and the news we encounter online. We have access to information that shows how vote-buying a form of corruption is, and that awareness helps us to resist the old practices that have trapped our elders." - P7

The participant points out the role of technology and social media in shaping resistance to patronage. Information access equips young voters with a critical lens, enabling them to reframe gift-giving not as kindness but as a corrupt practice.

"I personally do not want to depend on what politicians give us during campaign season, because I am looking for leaders who can bring lasting change. For me, a few hundred pesos or some groceries will not make a difference, but honest leadership can." - P5

This reflects a shift in priorities from short-term benefits to long-term governance. The younger generation increasingly values integrity and development-oriented platforms, challenging the transactional mindset of patronage.

"In our school, we often talk among ourselves about how politicians deceive people with money and goods, and many of us agree that we should not allow our votes to be controlled that way. It feels empowering to know that we can resist what has long been practiced." - P8

Here, peer influence and civic discussions become critical spaces where resistance to patronage is reinforced. The statement shows how younger voters derive collective strength from shared rejection of clientelism.

"Even if my family still accepts cash or food during elections, I personally refuse to take them because I believe that my vote should not be bought. I want to stand firm on my own decision and choose candidates based on their platforms, not their gifts." - P1

This reveals the tension between family traditions and individual choice. While older household members may continue to accept patronage, younger voters assert their independence by exercising conscience and personal conviction.

By contrast, Younger Generations and Emerging Resistance illustrates how younger voters, influenced by access to education, social media, and civic discussions, increasingly perceive patronage as corruption. Respondents expressed concern about selling their future for short-term gains, showing alignment with Anabo's (2021) findings that younger student voters prioritize candidate attributes such as integrity and vision over material inducements. This generational divide reflects Coppedge, Gerring, and Lindberg's (2024) observation that changing electoral systems and civic engagement opportunities can enhance voter agency, even in contexts historically dominated by patronage.

The second theme highlights how age influences perspectives on patronage politics. Older generations were found to accept patronage as an established political norm, while younger generations demonstrated a growing sense of resistance.

Furthermore, the younger generation's critical stance resonates with the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024) report, which noted that political reform and voter education initiatives are beginning to foster democratic accountability in the Philippines despite entrenched patronage structures. The findings also echo Birch and Muchlinski's (2024) argument that strengthening electoral integrity requires not only institutional reforms but also cultural shifts among voters.

Taken together, these findings affirm that political patronage in the Philippines is both a structural and cultural phenomenon—sustained by poverty, weak institutionalization, and historical traditions, yet increasingly challenged by younger generations equipped with new sources of information and democratic values. As Moustakas (1994) stresses in phenomenological inquiry, the lived experiences of participants illustrate both the constraints imposed by political structures and the subjective meanings individuals ascribe to them.

While socio-economic vulnerability entrenches patronage as a survival mechanism, age introduces variability: older generations perceive it as reciprocity, whereas younger generations interpret it as corruption undermining democracy. This tension reflects a hybrid political behavior framework (Aquino & Calonzo, 2015; Hutchcroft, 2020), where voters oscillate between material dependence and emerging civic ideals. The persistence of patronage politics suggests the resilience of inequality-driven electoral dynamics (Labuschagne, 2017; Mamogale, 2017), yet the resistance among youth points to possible trajectories for democratic renewal in future electoral cycles.

Influence of Political party patronage in the voting decision of electors

Table 2

Themes emerged in the political party patronage influence the voting decision of electors in a given political context

Theme	Subtheme
Theme 1: Material and Economic Incentives as Determinants of Voting	1.1: Direct Benefits from Patronage 1.2: Long-term Security and Opportunities
Theme 2: Socio-Cultural Obligations and Political Loyalty	2.1: Patron-Client Reciprocity and Gratitude 2.2: Identity, Belonging, and Social Pressure

Theme 1: Material and Economic Incentives as Determinants of Voting

One of the strongest ways political party patronage influences voting behavior is through the provision of material and economic incentives. In contexts of poverty and limited opportunities, electors often evaluate candidates based not on platforms or policies but on immediate and tangible benefits that can alleviate day-to-day struggles. This theme captures how direct handouts and long-term economic promises shape electoral choices.

Direct Benefits from Patronage

"During elections, politicians come to our houses giving money, rice, or canned goods, and for many of us, that becomes the reason why we vote for them. Even if we know the help will not last, we feel compelled to support the one who gave something during a difficult time." - P3

This statement shows how immediate relief in the form of cash or food items becomes decisive in the voting process. The urgency of survival needs overshadows long-term considerations, making patronage a highly effective electoral strategy.

"Some candidates promise us temporary jobs or small amounts of money, and since we are struggling, it is hard to resist. Many voters here choose based on what they receive, not on what the candidates plan to do after the election." - P7

This reflects how material assistance transforms into political capital. Even modest offerings carry weight in communities where daily needs are pressing, illustrating the transactional nature of electoral choices.

Long-term Security and Opportunities

"It is not only the money they give during the campaign. What matters more for us is the promise of employment or contracts for our family members once they win. That kind of assurance makes us stay loyal to them." - P4

Here, patronage extends beyond short-term incentives to long-term commitments. Promises of jobs, livelihood projects, or contracts create lasting bonds of dependency, making voters align their decisions with future security.

"We expect candidates to deliver projects like roads, water systems, or scholarships for our children. In return, we show them loyalty at the ballot box because we want to make sure the development they promised will reach our community." - P6

This demonstrates how collective needs influence voting behavior. Electors link their votes with the expectation of community development projects, reinforcing political loyalty as a means of securing opportunities for progress.

Patronage directly influences voting decisions by providing immediate material relief and by offering long-term promises of security and opportunity. Electors, particularly in socio-economically vulnerable contexts, often weigh these tangible incentives more heavily than platforms or ideologies, making patronage an enduring determinant of electoral outcomes.

The findings underscore how political patronage in the form of material and economic incentives continues to dominate voter decision-making, particularly in socio-economically vulnerable communities. The participants' accounts revealed that both short-term relief (cash, food, temporary jobs) and long-term promises (employment, infrastructure, scholarships) strongly influenced electoral choices.

The subtheme of direct benefits from patronage shows how voters weigh immediate assistance more heavily than campaign platforms. As one participant emphasized, "politicians come to our houses giving money, rice, or canned goods...for many of us, that becomes the reason why we vote for them" (P3). This reflects what Cruz, Labonne, and Querubín (2017) observed in the Philippines: vote-buying and gift-giving create binding political debts, particularly where poverty exacerbates citizens' dependency. In such environments, even modest amounts become politically decisive, confirming De Kadt's (2019) assertion that material inducements increase turnout but reinforce inequality, as disadvantaged groups become locked in cycles of transactional voting.

Beyond short-term relief, long-term security and opportunities were equally powerful in shaping voter loyalty. Promises of jobs, livelihood contracts, or educational support, as illustrated in P4's account, transform patronage into a durable mechanism of political control. This finding resonates with Jiang and Zhang (2020), who noted that in China's distributive politics, patronage thrives because it binds future expectations of security with present loyalty. Similarly, Arugay and Li (2022) documented that in Caloocan City, Philippine political families sustained dominance through a balance of immediate welfare provision and long-term dynastic linkages, showing that patronage adapts to both individual and community needs.

Collectively, these results reinforce what Ančić, Baketa, and Kovačić (2019) argued in their study of class and politics: economic precarity increases susceptibility to clientelist exchanges, as survival needs outweigh ideological or policy-based evaluations. In this sense, patronage becomes not only a political strategy but also a survival mechanism for voters, reflecting Aquino and Calonzo's (2015) observation that Philippine politics often shifts around material inducements rather than coherent programmatic visions.

Theme 2: Socio-Cultural Obligations and Political Loyalty

Beyond economic incentives, political party patronage also thrives on cultural and social structures. Electors' choices are shaped not only by what they receive materially but also by obligations of reciprocity, gratitude, and community belonging. This theme examines how cultural norms and identity networks reinforce political loyalty in ways that make defection costly.

Patron-Client Reciprocity and Gratitude

"When a politician helps us in times of sickness or emergencies, we feel indebted to them. Even without money during elections, we still vote for them because we cannot forget the assistance they gave." - P2

This highlights how personal relationships and reciprocal obligations become stronger motivators than campaign promises. Acts of assistance during vulnerable times build moral debts that electors repay with votes.

"In our community, once a candidate provides scholarships or hospital support, people feel it is only right to give back by voting for them. It is not about policies anymore but about showing gratitude." - P1

Here, political loyalty is framed as a moral duty. Assistance is reinterpreted not as transactional patronage but as benevolence that requires reciprocation, strengthening the patron-client bond.
Identity, Belonging, and Social Pressure

"Sometimes, it is not even about what I want personally. If my family and clan support a certain politician because of past favors, I cannot go against them, so I vote the same way." - P5

This statement shows how family and kinship structures enforce political conformity. Patronage ties create collective obligations, making individual deviation difficult.

"In our barangay, if you do not support the candidate backed by the majority, you will be seen as disloyal. To avoid conflict, many of us just follow what the community decides." - P8

This demonstrates how social pressure and belonging influence voting. Political loyalty becomes a mechanism for maintaining harmony within the community, even at the expense of personal choice.

Socio-cultural obligations make political patronage more than an economic transaction—it becomes embedded in relationships of gratitude, identity, and community belonging. Electors' decisions are shaped not only by material needs but also by social expectations, making resistance difficult. This reinforces political dynasties and patron-client systems that thrive on loyalty and reciprocity.

Beyond economic incentives, the findings also reveal the strong influence of socio-cultural obligations, where political patronage is embedded in reciprocity, gratitude, kinship, and community belonging. This theme highlights how Filipino socio-political culture makes patronage more than an economic transaction—it is also a moral and relational obligation.

The subtheme of patron-client reciprocity and gratitude illustrates how voters feel indebted for assistance during personal hardships. As one participant explained, "when a politician helps us in times of sickness or emergencies, we feel indebted to them...we cannot forget the assistance they gave" (P2). This aligns with Reyes' (2015) work on *loob* and *kapwa* in Filipino virtue ethics, where indebtedness (*utang na loob*) creates powerful moral obligations that are repaid through loyalty, often expressed in voting behavior. Saquibal and Saquibal (2016) similarly found that political dynasties in Iloilo City retained influence through social reciprocity, reinforcing loyalty even in the absence of tangible electoral gifts.

The subtheme of identity, belonging, and social pressure further illustrates how cultural structures such as family and clan networks influence voting. One participant admitted, "if my family and clan support a certain politician... I cannot go against them" (P5). This reflects what Cruz, Labonne, and Querubín (2017) documented—that family networks and collective obligations act as powerful conduits of electoral control. In tightly knit communities, deviating from family or barangay decisions risks social exclusion, making conformity a rational choice. This corresponds with Mancosu's (2019) argument that interpersonal communication and peer pressure during campaigns strongly influence individual voting behavior, particularly in collectivist societies.

These findings echo Casal Bertoa's (2016) notion of weak party system institutionalization in the Philippines, where loyalty is directed not to parties or ideologies but to personalities embedded in local kinship and community ties. Teehankee and Kasuya (2020) also noted that Philippine political parties remain fragile precisely because patron-client dynamics and social networks outweigh ideological structures, reinforcing cycles of dynastic dominance.

Together, the two themes reveal that voter behavior in the studied community is driven by an interplay of economic dependency and socio-cultural obligations. Immediate material relief and long-term promises ensure compliance at the individual level, while cultural norms of reciprocity, gratitude, and belonging reinforce loyalty at the collective level. These findings are consistent with Hutchcroft's (2020) analysis of Philippine electoral politics as a system of "strong patronage but weak parties," where personalistic and transactional ties sustain political dominance in the absence of institutionalized programmatic competition.

What emerges, therefore, is a hybrid model of voting behavior: material incentives provide the entry point for political loyalty, while socio-cultural obligations cement its durability. This dual mechanism explains why patronage persists despite electoral reforms (Lao & Rivera, 2023; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024), and why voters often prioritize tangible, relational benefits over abstract platforms. Ultimately, the findings affirm Creswell's (2013) and Moustakas' (1994) assertion that phenomenological inquiry captures the lived experiences of electors, revealing that in contexts of scarcity and cultural embeddedness, voting is less an ideological choice and more a negotiation of survival, reciprocity, and belonging.

Electors way in perceived role of patronage in shaping their loyalty to political parties

Table 3

Themes emerged in what ways do electors perceive the role of patronage in shaping their loyalty to political parties or candidates

Theme	Subtheme
1. Patronage as the Basis of Political Loyalty	1.1 Gratitude and Obligation 1.2 Reciprocity and Return of Favors 1.3 Emotional and Relational Bonds
2. Patronage as Conditional and Transactional Loyalty	2.1 Short-term and Benefit-Driven Allegiance 2.2 Economic Survival and Dependence 2.3 Weakness of Ideological Commitment

Theme 1: Patronage as the Basis of Political Loyalty

Electors in the community frequently described their loyalty to candidates and political parties as deeply intertwined with patronage practices. Far from perceiving these exchanges as corrupt or manipulative, many participants viewed them as the moral and cultural foundation of their political attachments. Expressions of gratitude, obligation, reciprocity, and emotional ties created enduring bonds that influenced their electoral choices across multiple election cycles. This theme emphasizes how loyalty is not merely transactional but is grounded in moral obligation and social relationships, reflecting the persistence of clientelistic norms in local political culture.

Gratitude and Obligation

"When the politician helped pay for my mother's hospital bills, I felt I owed him my vote. Even if others are better, I can't just ignore the help he gave during our most difficult time." - P2

This statement shows how deeply personal assistance becomes translated into loyalty. The act of helping a family in crisis transcends politics and transforms into a binding obligation.

"I see my loyalty as a form of respect. If someone extends their hand when I need it most, I don't forget that, and I show it through supporting them every election." - P7

Here, loyalty is depicted as a moral expression of respect and gratitude. Rather than being a rational choice between platforms, voting becomes a symbolic repayment of kindness.

"For us here, it's not just politics. It's utang na loob. Once they assist you, it becomes a moral duty to return the favor, and that's through loyalty in voting." - P5

The participant invokes the Filipino cultural concept of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), which shapes political behavior across generations.

"It feels wrong to abandon someone who has already given you support. My conscience tells me to stay with them because without them, maybe my children wouldn't be in school today." - P9

This account highlights the guilt and moral unease associated with betraying one's benefactor, reinforcing the persistence of loyalty despite alternative political options.

"Loyalty, for me, comes from gratitude. It's not about political parties or platforms, it's about remembering the kindness that was shown to my family." - P1

This statement underscores how gratitude outweighs abstract ideologies and party commitments. Taken together, these responses show that gratitude and obligation are not just emotional reactions but powerful social norms that structure political loyalty. This supports Rocamora's (2018) observation that *utang na loob* is a cornerstone of Philippine clientelism, where voters repay kindness with sustained loyalty. It also resonates with Sidel (2014), who describes patronage politics in the Philippines as a cultural system embedded in personal obligations and kinship-like ties.

Reciprocity and Return of Favors

"We are not rich, so when a candidate provides us rice and small financial aid, I believe it's only right to return that kindness by giving them our support." - P6

Here, loyalty is framed as a matter of fairness and repayment. Political exchanges are not seen as corruption but as mutual obligation.

"Every election is like a cycle of giving and returning. They give us help, and we give them our loyalty. That's the unspoken agreement in our community." - P4

This quote shows how reciprocity has become institutionalized as an electoral "contract," shaping community expectations during campaign periods.

"For me, loyalty is simply reciprocation. If they invest in us, then we must invest in them by staying loyal and voting them into office again." - P8

The participant describes politics in terms of investment and repayment, where loyalty is treated as a debt repaid through votes.

"I don't think of it as selling my vote. I see it as an exchange — they give us assistance, and we give them our loyalty when it matters." - P10

This statement reframes patronage as an ethical exchange, rejecting the stigma of vote-buying.

"Even if others criticize this practice, I think it's only fair. You can't just take something from someone and then turn your back when election comes." - P3

Here, loyalty is defended as a moral responsibility, not as an act of corruption.

This subtheme shows that electors perceive loyalty as part of a cycle of giving and returning. The findings echo Hicken's (2011) argument that clientelism persists because voters perceive these exchanges as fair and legitimate, reinforcing long-term loyalty to benefactors. Similarly, Schaffer (2007) argues that vote-buying in developing democracies is often framed by voters not as manipulation but as fairness and reciprocity.

Emotional and Relational Bonds

"It's not always about money. Sometimes it's how they treat us personally. If they greet us, visit our homes, or remember our names, we feel connected and loyal." - P1

This account highlights how symbolic gestures create loyalty, showing that emotional recognition is just as powerful as material assistance.

"My family has known the politician for years. That familiarity makes us feel loyal, because he's not just a leader — he's almost like a relative to us." - P5

Here, kinship and personal ties merge with politics, producing loyalty rooted in family-like bonds.

"When candidates make an effort to join community activities like weddings or funerals, that creates a bond, and that bond becomes loyalty." - P7

This statement reveals how shared participation in community rituals strengthens affective loyalty.

"Even if another candidate offers more benefits, I stick to the one I feel closer to because loyalty is also about personal relationships." - P8

This emphasizes that loyalty cannot be reduced to materialism alone; emotional connection outweighs higher offers from competitors.

"The kindness and respect they show make me loyal more than any promise or project. It's the personal connection that matters most to me." - P2

Here, loyalty emerges from symbolic respect and recognition rather than policies.

Emotional and relational bonds highlight that political loyalty in patronage systems is not solely transactional but deeply embedded in community life and social intimacy. This aligns with Sidel's (2014) view that Philippine politics operates not only through material patronage but also through social embeddedness, where leaders maintain ties by integrating themselves into the everyday lives of their constituents.

Theme 2: Patronage as Conditional and Transactional Loyalty

While many participants emphasized gratitude and obligation, others admitted that their loyalty to politicians and parties was conditional. For these electors, loyalty was pragmatic, temporary, and dependent on whether benefits continued to flow. Patronage shaped loyalty in ways that were short-term, tied to economic survival, and largely detached from ideology or party platforms. This theme shows that loyalty is not necessarily durable but shifts with circumstances, reflecting the fragile nature of political commitment under clientelism.

Short-term and Benefit-Driven Allegiance

"My loyalty doesn't last forever. If the support stops after election, then I also stop supporting them next time." - P2

This candid response illustrates loyalty as fleeting, contingent on continued benefit.

"For me, it's simple — if they continue to help us, I remain loyal. If not, then my loyalty shifts to whoever can provide assistance." - P4

Here, loyalty is framed as conditional bargaining, moving from one patron to another.

"The truth is, loyalty here is seasonal. It only shows during campaign season when we receive help, but after that, it fades." - P7

The cyclical nature of loyalty mirrors the electoral calendar, underscoring its temporary character.

"We're loyal because of the benefits, not because of long-term commitment. Once the benefits stop, there's no reason to stay." - P9

This statement strips loyalty down to immediate utility.

"I can be loyal to a candidate this year, but if another one offers better help next election, my loyalty can change. That's just reality" - P5

This acknowledges the fluidity of loyalty in contexts where multiple patrons compete.

This subtheme resonates with Schaffer's (2007) finding that voters often treat loyalty as contingent, shifting allegiance based on short-term material incentives. Loyalty here is transactional, not ideological.

Economic Survival and Dependence

"We depend on politicians for food, jobs, and medicine, so our loyalty is tied to survival, not to party colors or slogans." - P6

Here, loyalty reflects desperation and survival rather than political conviction.

"Loyalty becomes necessary when you have no stable income. You support the one who helps you because you need to feed your family." - P3

This emphasizes how poverty transforms loyalty into a coping mechanism.

"It's not that we don't care about principles, but hunger pushes us to be loyal to whoever provides immediate support." - P1

Principles and ideals take a back seat to economic realities.

"We may want change, but at the end of the day, we choose loyalty to those who can help us survive day-to-day struggles." - P7

This illustrates the tension between desire for reform and necessity for survival.

"Loyalty here is not about politics. It's about who keeps our family afloat during difficult times." - P10

This underscores how economic insecurity compels loyalty.

This subtheme reflects Hicken's (2014) analysis that poor voters rationalize loyalty as a survival strategy. Patronage politics thrives in such conditions, not because of ignorance but because of necessity.

Weakness of Ideological Commitment

"Honestly, I don't even know the party platforms. My loyalty is not to ideologies but to whoever gives tangible help." - P2

This statement reflects how ideology fails to resonate at the grassroots.

"Even if the candidate's beliefs don't match mine, I stay loyal because their assistance is what really matters to me." - P8

Practical needs eclipse political principles.

"Political ideologies don't fill our stomachs. What builds loyalty here is the assistance we actually receive." - P4

This underscores materialism over programmatic commitments.

"I never considered party principles when voting. My loyalty is shaped by who directly touches our lives with help." - P6

Ideology is sidelined in favor of tangible interventions.

"Ideals sound good in speeches, but they don't influence my loyalty. Real support does." - P3

This illustrates skepticism toward rhetorical promises.

Weakness of Ideological Commitment demonstrates how programmatic politics remains fragile in contexts dominated by patronage. This finding supports Kitschelt and Wilkinson's (2007) argument that in clientelistic democracies, voters prioritize material benefits over ideological alignment.

The findings of this study reveal that electors' perceptions of patronage in shaping their loyalty to political parties or candidates revolve around two major dynamics: patronage as a foundation of political loyalty and patronage as conditional and transactional loyalty. These themes illustrate how the exchange of resources, favors, and personal connections deeply influences voters' sense of allegiance, yet also exposes the fragility of such loyalty when benefits are absent.

In the first theme, *patronage as a foundation of political loyalty*, participants highlighted how gratitude, reciprocity, and emotional ties drive their allegiance to candidates. Statements from electors reflect a cultural framing of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), where assistance during times of need—whether in the form of financial support, medical help, or livelihood opportunities—creates a moral obligation to remain loyal. This sentiment is not merely material but also relational, as voters emphasized the importance of being personally recognized or acknowledged by politicians. For many, loyalty is sustained not only because of what is given but also because of the sense of belonging and respect attached to the act of giving. Such findings align with Hicken (2011), who observed that patronage politics thrives in contexts where clientelism is embedded in social relations, creating obligations that extend beyond elections.

However, the second theme, *patronage as conditional and transactional loyalty*, reveals the limits of such allegiance. While voters acknowledged the importance of patronage, many admitted that their loyalty is contingent on the continuity of benefits. Participants expressed that once the flow of aid, jobs, or material goods ceases, their commitment to a candidate or party weakens. This perception positions patronage less as a long-term bond and more as a practical exchange, where political support is given in return for immediate needs. Electors also noted that loyalty in such cases is not anchored in ideology or shared visions of governance, but rather in the tangible resources received during election seasons. This resonates with Kitschelt and Wilkinson's (2007) assertion that clientelism fosters a transactional political culture where loyalty is shallow and prone to shifting once incentives disappear.

Taken together, these themes demonstrate a paradoxical role of patronage in electoral loyalty. On one hand, it fosters strong relational and cultural ties grounded in reciprocity and gratitude, reinforcing loyalty that transcends elections. On the other hand, it exposes the fragility of political allegiance, as voters may easily abandon parties or candidates if patronage no longer fulfills their practical or economic needs. Ultimately, the findings highlight that in the studied community, loyalty is rarely ideological; rather, it is shaped by the interplay of cultural obligations and material survival. This duality underscores the persistence of patronage politics in the Philippines, where voters navigate between moral duty and pragmatic necessity in shaping their political loyalties.

Conclusion

The study concludes that political patronage continues to shape voter behavior through the combined influence of demographic factors, socio-cultural obligations, and perceptions of loyalty, making it both resilient and contested in the Philippine political landscape. Older generations, constrained by socio-economic vulnerability, often accept patronage as reciprocity and survival, while younger voters, empowered by education, social media, and civic awareness, increasingly resist it as corruption that undermines democracy. At the same time, cultural norms such as *utang na loob*, kinship ties, and community belonging reinforce loyalty beyond material incentives, ensuring the persistence of political dynasties and weak party institutionalization. Yet, loyalty under patronage is paradoxical—durable when rooted in gratitude and personal ties, but fragile when contingent on the continuity of benefits—revealing its transactional and shallow foundations. These findings imply that reforms targeting poverty reduction,

political education, and civic empowerment are essential to weaken patronage's grip, while voter education initiatives should emphasize critical engagement over obligation to foster democratic accountability. Furthermore, the growing resistance among youth suggests a potential pathway for long-term democratic renewal, highlighting the need for institutions, educators, and civil society groups to invest in strengthening political efficacy and promoting values-based voting.

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