

# POLITICAL PARTIES FOR THE ALIENATED AND DISEMPOWERED: Partisan Politics in the Philippines and the question of Political Alienation

By Anthony Lawrence Borja



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## Political Parties for the Alienated and Disempowered: Partisan Politics in the Philippines and the question of Political Alienation

Standing before the movements of the public sphere are citizens yearning to voice out their opinions and values. They can do this through means ranging from the ballot to acts of public protest. Between them and the government stands their representatives whose existence and legitimacy relies on them embodying the will of their constituents. In turn, these representatives are organized along clear ideological and policy lines embodied by their respective political parties. This imagery, however, is but a summary of a long standing and mostly [Western political tradition](#). This ideal of political representation through partisan politics is far from the realities of Philippine politics. Scholars on Philippine politics are in general agreement that its longstanding democratization project is characterized by weak political parties and strong personality politics.

Moreover, calls for deepening reform of the political party system have fallen on deaf ears for the basic reason that the status quo feeds on the weakness of political parties (e.g. party switching, personality politics, patron-client relations etc.). In a set of works published more than a decade ago, [Aceron](#) and [Teehankee](#) in their respective works argued for institutional reforms that could strengthen, or at least lay down the foundations for the development of mass-based political parties. They also emphasized the importance of building strong citizen-party relations.

*Nevertheless, are citizens even willing to be active members of political parties? Notwithstanding their already weak relationship with political parties and representatives, are Filipino citizens even willing to be politically active in general?* I will illustrate in this essay that majority of Filipinos are not psycho-politically oriented towards partisan politics as a specific case, and political participation in general. From this, I posit that *political alienation is the primary psycho-political obstacle facing political party reform*. Moreover, I entertain the idea that *developing democratic political representation in the Philippines should be tied to other forms of organization outside political parties*. To elaborate, this essay will first introduce the notion of political alienation and its practical implications on political participation before moving on to a presentation of related data from the Asia Barometer Surveys.<sup>i</sup>

In understanding the relationship between citizens and political parties, one must first look at the relationship between citizens and politics in general. The concept of [political alienation](#) shows both the necessary separation and the dynamics between ordinary citizens, and the public sphere. Public affairs is an objectification of a citizen's needs and interests. In other words, an alienated citizen sees the satisfaction of private needs and wants (e.g. security, values, etc.) as something shaped, satisfied, or frustrated by public affairs. To be specific, Filipinos are aware that [politics affect their everyday lives](#). Also, contrary to any notions of widespread [apathy](#), Table 1 below shows that Filipino citizens are deeply attached to political affairs. The nature of this attachment, however, is a different issue that we can dissect through the notion of political alienation.

**TABLE 1: MEASURES OF EXPOSURE TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE (ASIA BAROMETER SURVEY)**

Items	1				2				3		
	Waves	2nd	3rd		4th	2nd	3rd		4th	2nd	3rd
Very interested	10.7	25	15.2	Everyday	45.9	47.7	43.6	Frequently	9.5	11.1	9.9
Somewhat interested	42.2	49.4	43.8	Several times a week	15.4	16.3	18.7	Occasionally	67	70	67.6
Not very interested	23.5	17.6	23.8	Once or twice a week	16.5	22.8	16.8	Never	22.4	17	22.2
Not at all interested	21.9	7.6	17	Not even once a week	14.3	9.3	15.6				
				Practically never	5.9	3.5	5				
Invalid	1.5	0.4	0.2	Invalid	1.9	0.4	0.3	Invalid	1	1.9	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Items:**

1. How interested would you say you are in politics?
2. How often do you follow news about politics and government?
3. When you get together with your family members or friends, how often do you discuss political matters?

\* Invalid (Can't Choose, Didn't Understand, Didn't Answer)

Other than the separation of citizens from public affairs, political alienation also refers to their relationship with themselves and each other as political actors. To elaborate, it is a fact that [citizens](#) cannot stay in the public sphere for prolonged periods of time nor should they be expected to be constantly politically active. While being outside the public sphere, citizens evaluate their own political capacity through the actions (success and failure) of their representatives (from elected representatives to political activists fighting for shared advocacies and interests). After participating in politics (e.g. voting), citizens then evaluate their political capacity in line with what they perceive as the political normal after the elections. Simply put, political alienation also involves the separation of a person from him/herself as a citizen – his/her role and capacity as a citizen becomes an object of scrutiny and evaluation.

The primary implication of this is that people behave in accordance with their evaluations of: (1) themselves as political actors, (2) their representatives, and (3) the nature of public affairs in general. Ultimately, political alienation is a question of a cycle between [civic empowerment and disempowerment](#). In other words, it is not a question of constant empowerment but that of a virtuous cycle wherein citizens feel empowered despite being outside politics (i.e. they see themselves as capable of affecting politics when they decide to participate in it.).

Are Filipinos situated within such a virtuous cycle? The answer is a clear no and Table 2 below shows the nature of the vicious cycle that most citizens are in. We must note that while most Filipino citizens deem themselves as both capable of changing the government, and free to speak and organize themselves, they nevertheless hold low evaluations of themselves as political actors. Most Filipinos see themselves as thoroughly incapable of participating in politics or even understanding it. Also, most see themselves as incapable of influencing the government outside elections. Simply put, the political alienation of Filipinos is based upon a vicious cycle of disempowerment outside electoral participation.

**TABLE 2: POLITICAL DISEMPOWERMENT**

ITEMS	1			2			3			4		
	2nd	3rd	4th	2nd	3rd	4th	2nd	3rd	4th	2nd	3rd	4th
<b>WAVES</b>												
Strongly agree	34.8	47.8	31.1	15.8	17.7	15	33.5	42.1	31.3	31.7	35	27.9
Agree	33.9	31.8	40.6	34.2	35.3	41.6	33.1	33.5	39.4	34.7	39.8	41.1
Disagree	18.6	14.7	19.5	32.1	32.6	29.7	21.9	17.3	21.2	21.9	17.4	22.3
Strongly Disagree	11.1	5.5	8.4	13.3	13.2	13.3	9.4	6.8	7.5	9.3	7.1	8.3
Invalid*	1.6	0.2	0.5	4.7	1.3	0.4	2.1	0.5	0.6	2.5	0.9	0.5
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

  

ITEMS	4			5			6			7	
	2nd	3rd	4th	2nd	3rd	4th	2nd	3rd	4th	3rd	4th
<b>WAVES</b>											
Strongly agree	31.7	35	27.9	8.7	16.9	12.4	25.9	24.9	20.1	19.3	18.7
Agree	34.7	39.8	41.1	18.7	26.8	20.9	31.2	33.9	39.4	32.9	36.8
Disagree	21.9	17.4	22.3	24	23	27.8	25.7	27.2	27.7	31.6	29.4
Strongly Disagree	9.3	7.1	8.3	45.6	33.1	37.8	13.2	13.3	12	15.6	14.1
Invalid*	2.5	0.9	0.5	3	0.3	1.1	4	0.9	0.9	0.7	0.9
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

**Items:**

1. People have the power to change a government they don't like
2. Between elections, the people have no way of holding the government responsible for its actions
3. People are free to speak what they think without fear.
4. People can join any organization they like without fear.
5. I think I have the ability to participate in politics.
6. Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on.
7. People like me don't have any influence over what the government does.

\* **Invalid (Can't Choose, Didn't Understand, Didn't Answer)**

The implications of this vicious cycle upon political behavior is not surprising. Table 3 below shows that most Filipinos don't and are unlikely to engage in non-electoral modes of participation. This must be understood in the context of relatively high voter turnouts. From this juxtaposition we can surmise that vicious cycle of disempowerment exposed above is practically founded on [electoralism](#) or this emphasis on elections as a means for civic empowerment. This problem, however, must not be seen as an externally imposed pathology upon a liberal democratization project. Instead, as was argued by the late [Benjamin Barber](#), this tendency towards the reduction of civic empowerment to the ballot is in the nature of liberal democracy itself, specifically, its emphasis on the power of institutions, the rule of law, and political individualism – factors that are not necessarily in harmony with collective political participation. In other words, the liberal democratic ideal holds little space for grassroots political action due to the primacy of institutions, while providing few incentives for collective action due to its political individualism.

**TABLE 3: NON-ELECTORAL POLITICAL BEHAVIOR**

ITEMS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	3rd Wave								
Never Done	87.4	82.3	72.4	85.9	92.9	78.2	88.1	91.6	95.2
Once	7.4	10.8	16.2	8.9	3.7	14.5	8.4	5.1	2.8
More than once	5.2	7	11.4	5.2	3.3	7.3	3.5	3.2	1.9
Invalid	0	0	0	0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0

Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	<b>4<sup>th</sup> Wave</b>								
I have done this more than once	3.9	8.7	11.1	4.1	1.1	7.2	2.8	1.7	0.5
I have done this once	8.1	11.6	14.4	8.3	2.3	10.7	6.2	2.9	1.7
I have never done this.	<b>87.6</b>	<b>78.7</b>	<b>73.9</b>	<b>87.1</b>	<b>95.8</b>	<b>81.4</b>	<b>90.3</b>	<b>94.5</b>	<b>97</b>
Invalid	0.4	1	0.7	0.5	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.9	0.9
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

**Items:**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Contacted elected officials or legislative representative | 6. Got together with others to try to resolve local issues            |
| 2. Contacted officials at higher level.                      | 7. Got together with others to raise an issue or sign a petition      |
| 3. Contacted traditional leaders/community leaders.          | 8. Attended a demonstration or protest march                          |
| 4. Contacted other influential people outside the government | 9. Used force or violence for a political cause                       |
| 5. Contacted news media                                      | <b>Invalid - Can't choose, decline to answer, or can't understand</b> |

Hence, we arrive at the crux of our discussion. If the political psyche of Filipino citizens is chained to a vicious cycle of self-evaluated disempowerment, and as a consequence, unwilling to participate in politics beyond the ballot, how can one develop strong citizen-party relations? Are most Filipino citizens even open to paradigm of partisan politics? These questions are derived not only from the vicious cycle of disempowerment illustrated earlier but also from the predominance of personality/leader-centric politics that [mainstream models consider as anathema to partisan politics](#).

In response to these problems, we can entertain two possible solutions that can turn the vicious cycle of disempowerment to a virtuous one. On one hand, in line with Barber's proposal to integrate political participation into existing institutions, reform can take a direction away from the partisan paradigm into expanding effective and direct public participation at the local level, and/or through civil society organizations. This is not an entirely new solution in line with existing efforts for [participatory governance in the Philippines](#). What is important, however, is to turn such local efforts into a paradigmatic shift towards active citizenship even at the expense of political parties and party-lists. On the other hand, at the level of ideals, the electoral participation must be portrayed for what it truly is, just one and the least effective means of civic participation in public affairs. Together, these two solutions simultaneously approach the poles of this vicious cycle. Encouraging local civic participation alleviates the sense of disempowerment while downplaying the mythos of suffrage as a political right closes down an outlet for political energies that in turn can be redirected towards other, more collective and direct means of participating in public affairs. Overall, this psycho-political analytical approach highlights the importance of political agency in achieving institutional and systemic reforms. Simply put, without changes in psycho-political and behavioral tendencies, reform in whatever form is fragile.

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