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Empowering Voices: Analyzing The Political Participation In The Province Of Camarines Norte

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Abstract

This study entitled "Empowering Voices: Analyzing the Political Participation in the Province of Camarines Norte" examined the political participation of residents in Camarines Norte by exploring the factors that influence civic engagement, the barriers that hinder participation, and the possible strategies to strengthen democratic involvement. Anchored on the Civic Voluntarism Model, the study emphasized the interaction of political resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks in shaping political behavior. A mixed-method research design was utilized, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches through survey questionnaires and semi-structured key informant interviews. The study involved 385 respondents from selected municipalities in Camarines Norte and 15 purposively chosen participants for in-depth interviews.

Findings revealed that political participation in the province is influenced by various socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. Participants demonstrated strong emotional investment in grassroots politics due to personal familiarity with local leaders, while national politics was often associated with distrust, misinformation, and political cynicism. Social media emerged as both a tool for political awareness and a source of division and political fatigue. Family influence, peer networks, and community relationships significantly shaped political engagement, while vote buying, logistical difficulties during elections, and fear of political retaliation discouraged active participation. Despite these challenges, many participants still viewed political involvement as empowering and essential for democratic change.

The study concluded that strengthening voter education and civic engagement programs is essential in promoting informed, inclusive, and active political participation in Camarines Norte. It recommended the implementation of contextualized voter education initiatives, community-based awareness campaigns, and inclusive democratic practices to empower citizens and encourage meaningful participation in political processes.

KEYWORDS: Political participation; Civic engagement; Voter education; Political cynicism; Grassroots democracy.

Introduction

Political participation is considered one of the fundamental pillars of a democratic society because it allows citizens to influence political decisions, governance, and public policies. It encompasses various forms of civic engagement such as voting, attending political meetings, participating in campaigns, joining political organizations, engaging in community discussions, and expressing political opinions both offline and online. In democratic nations like the Philippines, active political participation strengthens accountability, representation, and inclusive governance. However, political engagement is often shaped by social, economic, cultural, and technological factors that either encourage or discourage citizens from becoming actively involved in political processes [64], [75].

In recent years, the nature of political participation has significantly evolved due to the emergence of digital technologies and social media platforms. Online political participation has become increasingly prominent as citizens use digital spaces to express political views, access information, participate in discussions, and mobilize support for political causes. Ruess et al. emphasized that digital media has transformed political participation by expanding opportunities for civic engagement and communication among citizens [64]. Similarly, Theocharis et al. noted that digitally networked participation has emerged as a distinct form of political engagement, particularly among younger and educated individuals [76]. These developments demonstrate how technological advancements continue to reshape political behavior and democratic participation across societies.

Despite the expansion of political participation through digital platforms, various barriers continue to affect meaningful civic engagement. Research has shown that political participation remains uneven due to socio-economic inequalities, gender disparities, lack of political efficacy, misinformation, and structural limitations. Heger and Hoffmann found that gender differences and political self-efficacy significantly influence online political participation [36], while Waltz and Schippers identified accessibility barriers, limited resources, and institutional inequalities as obstacles to inclusive democratic participation [81]. Moreover, Toff and Nielsen argued that political disengagement may stem from emotional exhaustion and

anxiety caused by constant exposure to political news and conflicts [77]. These findings suggest that while opportunities for participation have expanded, challenges to democratic inclusion persist.

In the Philippine context, political participation is deeply influenced by local political culture, family affiliations, social relationships, economic conditions, and media exposure. Grassroots politics, particularly at the barangay and municipal levels, often rely on personal relationships and community familiarity rather than ideological platforms. At the same time, concerns regarding political dynasties, vote buying, misinformation, and distrust in political institutions continue to affect public confidence in democratic processes [13], [61]. Such realities highlight the importance of understanding how local experiences shape political engagement, especially in provincial communities where socio-cultural dynamics strongly influence political behavior.

The province of Camarines Norte presents a relevant setting for examining political participation due to its unique socio-political environment and active local political dynamics. While existing studies have explored political participation in broader national and international contexts, limited research has focused specifically on the lived experiences, motivations, and barriers encountered by residents in provincial areas such as Camarines Norte. This gap underscores the need for localized studies that examine how residents participate in political activities, how they perceive political institutions, and what factors influence their civic engagement.

Methods and Methodology

The study utilized a mixed-method research design combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of political participation in the Province of Camarines Norte. The mixed-method approach enabled the researcher to gather statistical data while also exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants.

For the quantitative component, the study employed a survey questionnaire consisting of 30 indicators related to the factors influencing political participation. A total of 385 respondents were selected from five municipalities in Camarines Norte namely Daet, Labo, Mercedes, Vinzons, and Talisay using stratified random sampling to ensure proper representation of the population. The collected quantitative data were analyzed using weighted mean to determine the most influential factors affecting political participation.

For the qualitative component, the researcher conducted semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KII) with 15 purposively selected participants, with three participants coming from each municipality. The participants were chosen based on specific criteria such as being registered voters, residents of the selected municipalities, and active participants in elections. The qualitative data focused on understanding the participants' lived experiences, perceptions, motivations, and barriers related to political participation.

The qualitative data gathered from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Responses were transcribed, coded, categorized, and interpreted to identify recurring themes and patterns related to political engagement in the province. Meanwhile, the survey results and interview findings were integrated to provide a deeper understanding of the socio-political realities, challenges, and factors influencing political participation in Camarines Norte.

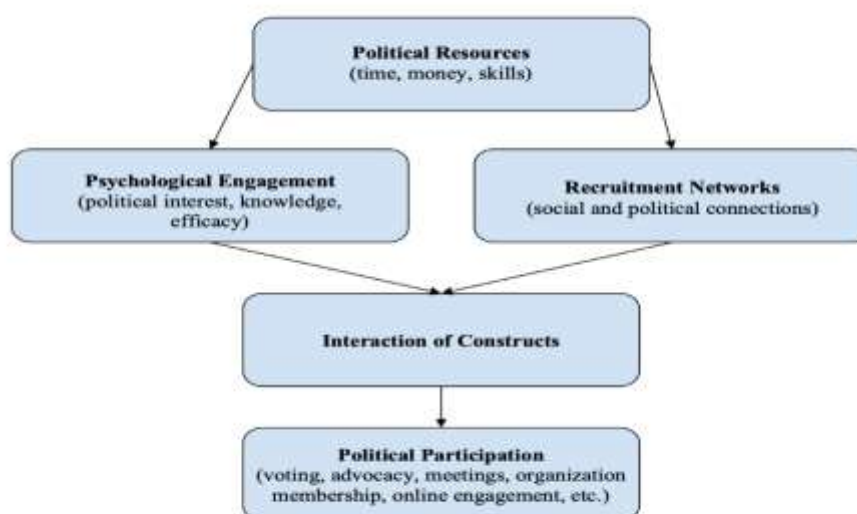


Figure 1. *Theoretical Paradigm*

The framework of the study is anchored on the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, which explains political participation as a product of the interaction among political resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks [80]. The framework posits that citizens are more likely to participate in political and civic activities when they possess adequate resources, demonstrate political interest and efficacy, and are connected to supportive social and political networks.

Political resources refer to the availability of time, money, education, and civic skills that enable individuals to engage in political activities. These resources influence the capacity of citizens to access political information, participate in democratic processes, and become involved in civic affairs [82]. Psychological engagement pertains to political interest, political knowledge, and political efficacy, which collectively shape an individual's motivation and willingness to participate in governance and public decision-making [58]. Recruitment networks, on the other hand, involve social and political connections such as family influence, peer groups, community organizations, and social media networks that encourage and mobilize political participation [74], [75].

The framework further emphasizes the interaction of these constructs, suggesting that political participation is not determined by a single factor but by the combined influence of personal capabilities, internal motivations, and social mobilization. Individuals with stronger political resources, higher political efficacy, and broader social networks are more likely to engage in political activities such as voting, advocacy, attending meetings, organizational membership, and online political engagement [64], [76].

In the context of Camarines Norte, the framework provides a localized understanding of how socio-economic conditions, political awareness, and community relationships shape political behavior and civic participation. It serves as the foundation for analyzing the factors influencing political participation and identifying mechanisms that may strengthen democratic engagement within the province [11], [69].

Results

On the Description of the Political Participation of Residents in Camarines Norte

The findings revealed that political participation in Camarines Norte is characterized by a mixture of civic empowerment, political cynicism, and grassroots engagement. Many respondents associated politics with corruption, favoritism, political dynasties, and unfulfilled promises, resulting in distrust toward political leaders and institutions. Participants perceived politics as chaotic and often influenced by money and patronage, weakening confidence in democratic processes.

Despite this skepticism, residents—particularly the youth—still viewed participation in rallies, campaigns, and voting activities as empowering experiences. Respondents described political participation as a source of hope, collective identity, and civic responsibility even when their preferred candidates did not win. Political engagement at the barangay level was found to be stronger than participation in national politics because voters personally knew local candidates and felt more emotionally connected to community-based governance.

The study further revealed that family and peer influence significantly shape political beliefs and voting behavior. Many respondents admitted that political preferences are often inherited within households or influenced by clan affiliations. Moreover, vote buying remains prevalent, particularly in rural communities, where economic hardship and the cultural value of *utang na loob* continue to affect voter decisions.

Another important finding was the emotional and logistical burden experienced during elections. Long queues, overcrowded polling centers, and extreme heat discouraged some residents from actively participating in future electoral activities.

On the Factors Influencing the Political Participation of Residents in Camarines Norte

The study identified several socio-political, economic, and technological factors influencing political participation in the province. Social media emerged as both a facilitator and barrier to civic engagement. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube increased political awareness and access to information, especially among younger voters. However, respondents also reported that online political discourse had become toxic due to misinformation, fake news, political polarization, and paid influencers, leading to emotional exhaustion and political disengagement.

Fear of retaliation and social judgment also discouraged political expression. Government employees and politically vulnerable individuals hesitated to openly express political opinions because they feared losing employment opportunities or experiencing backlash from political groups. This culture of political caution limited free political discourse within communities.

Economic hardship was another major factor affecting civic participation. Many respondents prioritized daily survival and financial needs over political involvement, leaving little time or motivation for political discussions and community engagement. The findings also emphasized that digital illiteracy and the inability to identify credible information sources further weakened informed participation, particularly among older residents.

Additionally, the study found that trust in leadership largely depended on leaders' visibility, sincerity, and grassroots presence. Leaders perceived as community-oriented and service-driven gained public trust, while political dynasties, favoritism, and selective governance reduced confidence in political institutions.

On the Proposed Program to Enhance Political Participation in Camarines Norte

Based on the findings, the study proposed a localized voter education and civic engagement program designed to strengthen democratic participation and political literacy in Camarines Norte. The proposed intervention focuses on addressing misinformation, political cynicism, vote buying, and digital illiteracy through community-centered and youth-oriented initiatives.

The program includes activities such as civic leadership training, community forums, digital literacy workshops, anti-disinformation campaigns, and social media advocacy training. It also promotes ethical digital citizenship and encourages citizens to use online platforms responsibly for political awareness and civic advocacy. Participants are expected to create civic-oriented content such as infographics, videos, and educational materials to encourage informed political participation.

Furthermore, the program emphasizes anti-clientelism education by educating residents about the harmful effects of vote buying and transactional politics. Community dialogues, mock elections, and campaign pledge-signing activities were recommended to encourage voters to reject patronage politics and uphold ethical voting behavior. The proposed program ultimately aims to increase voter turnout, improve political literacy, strengthen trust in governance, and empower marginalized sectors, especially the youth, to become active participants in democratic processes.

Discussion

The findings of the study provide a comprehensive understanding of the political participation of residents in Camarines Norte, the factors shaping their civic engagement, and the possible interventions that may strengthen democratic involvement in the province. These interpretations highlight both the structural limitations and emerging opportunities for political empowerment in rural communities.

Implications on the Description of Political Participation in Camarines Norte

The findings demonstrated that political participation in Camarines Norte is characterized by both democratic engagement and political disillusionment. Although many respondents actively participated in voting, rallies, and community discussions, a substantial number expressed distrust toward political institutions due to corruption, political dynasties, favoritism, and unfulfilled promises. This indicates that political participation in the province is not necessarily rooted in confidence in governance, but rather in a perceived civic obligation and hope for social change.

The prevalence of political cynicism suggests that repeated exposure to ineffective governance and transactional politics has weakened citizens' psychological engagement with democratic institutions. From the perspective of the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM), low political trust diminishes political efficacy, thereby reducing long-term civic participation. Citizens may continue to vote during elections, yet disengage from broader forms of participatory governance such as public consultations, policy advocacy, and civic organizing. This finding implies that electoral participation alone cannot serve as a sufficient indicator of democratic health in rural communities. Genuine democratic participation requires sustained trust between citizens and political institutions.

The stronger emotional attachment to barangay-level politics compared to national politics further reflects the relational nature of political participation in the Philippine context. Residents were more likely to participate actively when political leaders were personally known and directly connected to community concerns. This demonstrates that proximity, familiarity, and grassroots visibility significantly influence political engagement. The implication of this finding is that local governments possess a critical role in rebuilding democratic trust because citizens perceive local governance as more accessible and responsive than national political structures. Strengthening participatory mechanisms at the barangay level may therefore serve as an effective strategy for improving civic engagement across the province.

The findings also revealed that political participation functions as a source of empowerment, particularly among younger participants. Respondents associated participation in rallies, campaigns, and advocacy activities with hope, collective identity, and social responsibility. This demonstrates that despite widespread political frustration, political engagement remains an important avenue for civic expression and democratic empowerment. The implication is that political participation should not only be viewed as a procedural activity but also as a psychosocial process that strengthens civic identity and democratic consciousness. Programs that encourage youth participation and grassroots activism may therefore cultivate a more politically informed and socially responsible citizenry.

However, the persistence of vote buying and the influence of *utang na loob* indicate that political participation remains vulnerable to economic dependency and patronage politics. Economic insecurity compels some voters to prioritize short-term material benefits over long-term governance outcomes. This

suggests that democratic participation in marginalized communities cannot be separated from broader socio-economic conditions. The implication is that political reforms must be accompanied by economic empowerment initiatives to reduce citizens' dependence on transactional political systems.

Implications on the Factors Influencing Political Participation

The study identified several interrelated factors influencing political participation, including social media exposure, misinformation, economic hardship, fear of retaliation, digital illiteracy, and family influence. These findings demonstrate that political participation is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by structural, technological, and cultural conditions.

The dual role of social media as both an enabler and barrier to political participation reflects the evolving nature of democratic engagement in the digital era. On one hand, platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube expanded access to political information and encouraged political awareness among younger voters. On the other hand, respondents reported emotional exhaustion caused by toxic political discourse, misinformation, and online polarization. This finding suggests that digital spaces have become influential political arenas that simultaneously empower and discourage civic participation. The implication is that digital literacy has become an essential component of democratic participation. Without the ability to critically evaluate information, citizens remain vulnerable to manipulation, disinformation, and ideological polarization.

The findings further indicate that fear of political backlash discourages open political expression, particularly among government employees and politically vulnerable individuals. This demonstrates the continued existence of politically charged environments where civic expression may carry social or professional risks. From a democratic perspective, such conditions weaken political inclusivity and discourage deliberative participation. The implication is that democratic governance must ensure safe and inclusive political spaces where citizens can freely express opinions without fear of retaliation or discrimination.

Economic hardship also emerged as a major factor limiting political participation. Many respondents prioritized livelihood and daily survival over political involvement, indicating that socio-economic inequality directly affects civic engagement. This finding supports the argument of the Civic Voluntarism Model that limited resources constrain political participation. Citizens who lack time, education, financial stability, and access to information are less likely to engage meaningfully in political activities. The implication is that improving democratic participation requires addressing broader socio-economic inequalities that hinder citizens' capacity to participate actively in governance.

Family and peer influence were likewise found to shape political behavior and voting patterns. Political preferences were often inherited within households or influenced by collective family decisions. This highlights the importance of recruitment networks in shaping civic participation. The implication of this finding is that political education programs should extend beyond individuals and target families and communities as collective political actors. Civic education campaigns rooted in community dialogue may therefore become more effective in transforming political attitudes and behaviors.

Finally, the findings concerning logistical difficulties during elections—including overcrowded polling centers, long queues, and uncomfortable voting conditions—demonstrate how institutional inefficiencies discourage democratic participation. The implication is that electoral participation is not solely determined by political willingness, but also by the accessibility and quality of electoral systems. Enhancing voter convenience and improving election management may therefore contribute to higher civic participation and stronger democratic legitimacy.

Implications on the Proposed Program to Enhance Political Participation

The proposed voter education and civic engagement program reflects the need for localized and context-sensitive interventions to strengthen democratic participation in Camarines Norte. The findings suggest that traditional voter education programs may no longer be sufficient in addressing contemporary political challenges such as misinformation, digital manipulation, political cynicism, and clientelism. Consequently, the proposed program emphasizes civic literacy, ethical digital citizenship, grassroots advocacy, and anti-vote-buying initiatives.

The inclusion of digital literacy workshops and social media advocacy training highlights the recognition that political engagement increasingly occurs in online environments. This implies that civic education must evolve alongside technological developments to remain relevant and effective. Equipping citizens with fact-checking skills, critical media literacy, and responsible online engagement practices may help combat disinformation and improve the quality of democratic discourse.

The anti-clientelism and anti-vote-buying components of the proposed program further imply that democratic reform requires both political and cultural transformation. By addressing the normalization of transactional politics, the program seeks to cultivate ethical political behavior and strengthen citizens'

understanding of accountable governance. This demonstrates that voter education should not only focus on electoral procedures but also on democratic values, civic responsibility, and political accountability. Moreover, the proposed community-based approach recognizes that political participation is deeply embedded within local social structures and relationships. The emphasis on barangay-level forums, youth civic circles, and community advocacy groups suggests that sustainable democratic participation is more likely to emerge when citizens are actively engaged within their immediate social environments. The implication is that grassroots-centered civic programs may be more effective than purely institutional or nationally centralized interventions in strengthening democratic culture in rural communities. Overall, the findings imply that political participation in Camarines Norte remains constrained by structural inequalities, political distrust, and digital challenges, yet the persistence of grassroots engagement and youth empowerment demonstrates significant democratic potential. Strengthening participatory governance therefore requires integrated interventions that address political literacy, socio-economic inequality, institutional trust, and inclusive civic engagement simultaneously.

Conclusion

This study concludes that political participation in the Province of Camarines Norte is shaped by a complex interaction of democratic engagement, socio-economic realities, cultural influences, and digital communication environments. Although residents continue to participate in electoral activities and grassroots political engagement, widespread political cynicism, distrust toward institutions, and dissatisfaction with governance remain evident. Corruption, political dynasties, favoritism, and vote-buying practices significantly weakened citizens' confidence in democratic processes and contributed to political disengagement among several sectors of the population.

Despite these challenges, the findings demonstrate that political participation continues to function as a source of empowerment, particularly among youth and community-based participants. Grassroots politics at the barangay level generated stronger emotional investment and civic involvement because of personal familiarity, direct interaction, and community-centered leadership. This suggests that localized democratic structures remain important spaces for rebuilding public trust and strengthening participatory governance.

The study further concludes that social media has transformed political participation into a highly digitalized and emotionally driven process. While online platforms increased political awareness and accessibility to information, they also intensified misinformation, polarization, and political fatigue. Consequently, digital literacy and critical media engagement emerged as essential requirements for informed and responsible democratic participation.

Moreover, structural barriers such as economic hardship, fear of political retaliation, digital illiteracy, and inefficient electoral processes limited citizens' ability to participate fully in civic and political activities. These findings affirm the assumptions of the Civic Voluntarism Model, which emphasizes that political participation is heavily influenced by resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks. Political behavior in Camarines Norte was strongly shaped by family influence, peer networks, and community relationships, demonstrating the social nature of political participation in rural communities.

The study also establishes that strengthening democratic participation requires interventions beyond traditional electoral education. Context-specific voter education programs, community-based civic initiatives, digital literacy campaigns, and anti-clientelism efforts are necessary to address the evolving political realities in the province. The proposed civic engagement program highlights the importance of empowering citizens through political awareness, ethical digital citizenship, and grassroots participation to cultivate a more inclusive, participatory, and accountable democratic culture.

Overall, the study underscores the significance of localized democratic empowerment in rural Philippine communities. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on political participation by demonstrating that meaningful civic engagement is not solely dependent on electoral participation, but also on citizens' trust in institutions, access to accurate information, socio-economic conditions, and opportunities for inclusive community involvement. Ultimately, fostering politically informed and empowered citizens remains essential in strengthening democratic governance and sustaining participatory political culture in Camarines Norte.

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