

filipino democracy through arendt's looking glass

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Abstract

This paper aims to assess the factors which affect the participation of the Filipino people in National Elections by applying Arendt's Philosophy on Politics specifically on its truthfulness as it affects a voter's agenda, receptivity, and participation. Also, this paper intends to emphasize the importance of participation of the Filipino people in the National Elections by relating it as an action in Arendt's notion of responsibility.

Keywords

Hannah Arendt, Philippine elections, politics, democracy, social responsibility



Introduction

The National Elections is a manifestation of Philippine democracy. This is an event which for years has been partially participated by the Filipino people. In the last two National Elections, though the number of actual voters increased, the number of those who did not participate also increased as reflected in the difference between the registered voters and those who actually voted. The number of Filipinos who did not participate implies a minority which, in Arendt's Philosophy, creates a certain impact in politics and thus, should not be ignored. This minority may be the sum of the hypothetical votes of those who were frustrated either with the quality of the candidates running for the position, or with the voter's reasoning in choosing a candidate to vote for.

Hence, this paper aims to assess the factors which affect the participation of the Filipino people in National Elections by applying Arendt's Philosophy on Politics specifically on its truthfulness as it affects a voter's agenda, receptivity, and participation. Also, this paper intends to emphasize the importance of participation of the Filipino people in the National Elections by relating it as an action in Arendt's notion of Responsibility.

Philippine Democracy

The Philippines ranks twelfth in the list of most populous countries¹ and correspondingly, as its population continues to rise, the number of its voters increases. Based from the data of the country's previous National Elections, the total of registered voters from 2013 having a value of 50,922,248 reflected a slight increase from 2010 with 50,771,974.² This increase in the total of registered voters has been a trend since the 1998 National and Local Elections with the exception of the ARMM Region which declined in its 2005 ARMM Elections. The highest increase rate in the National Elections is 19.72% as reflected in the increase of registered voters from 2001 (36,354,898) to 2004 (43,522,634).³ This is a good indication of the Filipinos' good intention to exercise their political responsibility through civic participation.

However, the Voters' Turn-out is depressing. That is, from the 50,922,248 registered voters in the 2013 National and Local Elections, only 39,301,611 actually voted indicating a 77.18% Voters' Turn-out rate.⁴ As the Registered Voters' rate has been increasing, the Voters' Turn-out rate has also been simultaneously increasing and has

¹ Philippine Population: <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/philippines-population/> (accessed April 25, 2016).

² A Statistical Analysis of Voter's Registration and Participation, <http://www.nscb.gov.ph/statseries/04/SS-200405-PP2-01.asp> (accessed April 9, 2016).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

become a trend since the last 2007 (73.10%) and 2010 (75.02%) National and Local Elections.⁵ What might be the reasons why Filipinos opted not to vote though they were registered? What effect does the candidates' campaign period bring to the Filipino Voter as it fills the gap between the Registration and the Election Day?

The National Elections is a manifestation of Philippine democracy. This is an event in which civic participation is highly encouraged and expected as democracy is commonly known as "the rule by many."⁶ Thus, the campaign period plays a crucial role before the election as it serves to be the communication and promotion period of each candidate's and party list's background, platforms, and promises to all registered voters worldwide. The campaign period thus becomes a rampant poster season as different names, photos, and positions of candidates are posted and scattered in every corner of the street especially in highly populated areas. Further, this is also the period when interactions between candidates and voters are done through speeches and debates wherein the candidates who are running for high-level government positions are asked of their outlook and standpoints regarding current and relevant issues of the nation.

The number of registered Filipino voters who did not vote is not insignificant. These citizens constitute a minority who, for some factors, have decided not to vote despite their capacity and eligibility. Nevertheless, their non-participation should not be neglected. Certainly, there are factors which led to their non-participative action and has made them deprive themselves of the right to vote—an event which may change the system of governance in the country according to the needs of the Filipino people and an event wherein they could exercise their political responsibility. Some would say that they have lost their hope in the National Elections not only because of the qualities of the candidates but more so because of the reasoning that some Filipinos uphold in choosing a candidate to vote for.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) gives this exhortation: "In today's political mentality, a public office supposedly a public trust for public service has degenerated into self-service for personal or family gains"⁷ because "Philippine elections make popularity not competence count, opportunism not nationalism matter, promises not integrity relevant."⁸ Further, money and power behind government positions after the elections entail consequences which an ordinary citizen may be unaware of. Such is that "political debts are paid by elected public officials by the appointment of their

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 242.

⁷ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippines Politics* (September 16, 1997), (<http://ovc.blogspot.com/2014/01/cbcp-pastoral-exhortation-on.html>, accessed April 19, 2016).

⁸ Ibid.

supporters to juicy government positions,"⁹ and that "the electoral process is systematically subverted by public officials to favor their own selves, their families and/or special friends"¹⁰ because "political competition is still dominated by clan alliances that were non-programmatic and tightly associated with the political personalities they backed."¹¹ Historically, this "political instability lies in the country's culture of 'bossism' which describes a system of political control that is centered on a single "boss", or a powerful figure, under whom a number of lesser figures serve."¹² Hence, "the system is bound together by reciprocity in promoting financial and social self-interest."¹³

In discussing democratic issues in the Philippine politics, we now assess truthfulness especially during the candidates' campaign period as it affects voter's participation and inevitably increases the rate of the Voter's Turn-out in the National Elections. This we will do using Arendt's thinking on politics. This paper also intends to emphasize the importance of political responsibility by exercising civic participation specifically in the National Elections by relating it as an action in Arendt's notion of responsibility.

Politics in Arendt's Philosophy

In her introduction to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Margaret Canovan writes that

repudiating the title of "political philosopher," (Arendt) argued that the mistake made by all political philosophers since Plato has been to ignore the fundamental condition of politics: that it goes on among plural human beings, each of whom can act and start something new. The results that emerge from such interaction are contingent and unpredictable, matters of practical politics, subject to the agreement of many; they can never lie in theoretical considerations or the opinion of one person.¹⁴

Arendt's view of politics signifies a collective characteristic wherein each individual should be involved and well accounted for which explains why she imposed such a valued importance in dealing with the *minority*. Moreover, Arendt had perceived politics as an emergence of a person from the household¹⁵ or, in contemporary term, a person's

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gabriela van der Linden, *Making the Strong Just: Communication Strategies for Good Governance* (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 2010), 29.

¹³ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, via (Introduction).

¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

emergence from the family. She states that "whether a nation consists of equals or non-equals is of no great importance in this respect, for society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest."¹⁶

Having pointed out the origin of politics as perceived by Arendt, it is also noteworthy to highlight what for Arendt is a characteristic of a politician who has emerged from his respective household. First, Arendt described that "whoever entered the political realm had first to be ready to risk his life, and too great a love for life obstructed freedom, was a sure sign of slavishness."¹⁷ It was clear for Arendt that the political realm was not an inconsequential affair and that it entails a heavy responsibility of not just looking after one's life, but a life that is even bigger than one's own family. Consequently, she recognized courage as "the political virtue par excellence"¹⁸ and claimed that "only those men who possessed it could be admitted to a fellowship that was political in content and purpose and thereby transcended the mere togetherness imposed on all through the urgencies of life."¹⁹

Arendt has written rich and copious accounts regarding truthfulness in politics. She has divided truth into two distinct realities namely the rational truth which includes mathematical, scientific, and philosophic truths, and the factual truth, which, according to her, are "the facts and events that constitute the very texture of the political realm."²⁰ Having distinguished these two truths from one another, and having identified which is dominant in the political realm, she has recognized their relationship with "power" in politics and how these aspects can be easily abused and/or manipulated "for opinion, and not truth, belongs among the indispensable prerequisites of all power."²¹ Thus, between the two, "the chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever."²² Accordingly, Arendt believed that "every claim in the sphere of human affairs to an absolute truth, whose validity needs no support from the side of opinion, strikes at the very roots of all politics and all governments."²³ This will be further discussed in the following section as the principle that Arendt implies will be applied particularly in the event of the candidates' campaign period wherein each candidate

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *The New Yorker* (1967), 297.

²¹ Ibid., 298.

²² Ibid., 297.

²³ Ibid., 298.

engages himself in creating an image to be voted for by indistinctly declaring either rational or factual truths.

Interestingly, Arendt "has defined responsibility in terms of political presence."²⁴ That is, she regarded political presence as "both acting and belonging."²⁵ We already have identified the emergence from where politics occurred, as abovementioned, which also serves to prove that belonging indeed plays an important role in Arendt's concept of Politics. However, belongingness is not enough as for her, "a political status is defined, or even created, by actions and it is through actions that one reveals oneself as a political agent."²⁶ Further, this action is never just a consequence of one's own, but rather, affirming and applying the concept of belongingness, is a collective action wherein "(one's) presence is a presence to others"²⁷ and thus, a political situation is changed in an "unexpected way when (a person) reveals his presence to others."²⁸ It is as if, the magnitude of an absent group or individual is made present by one's encompassing action and presence. One's action recognizes another's absence and so he acts or thinks in accord to how will they act should they be present with him at the moment. Hence, this is when "(one's) doing encounters (one's) fellowship and as a result of this interaction, perpetuates it."²⁹ This concept of responsibility in the context of political presence will also be further discussed in the succeeding sections as it will be discussed in relation to a voter's or even just a citizen's civic participation.

Arendt and Philippine Politics

Democracy for Arendt "is a form of government where the few rule, at least supposedly in the interest of the many . . . and public happiness and public freedom . . . become the privilege of the few."³⁰ On the contrary, it has been observed that in the Philippine democracy, "the interests of the powerful and a few wealthy individuals are pitted against the many weak and poor people through political peddling."³¹ As pointed out in our earlier discussions, after the elections, once the elected public official starts his office, he then becomes the "boss" or a powerful figure whose power ought to serve the people but unfortunately, uses this power customarily to serve his own interest in

²⁴ Annabel Herzog, "Hannah Arendt's Concept of Responsibility," in *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, n.d.: 39-56, 39 .

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 43.

²⁷ Ibid., 44.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 269.

³¹ CBCP, *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippines Politics*.

congruence with the interest of many other officials in their respective offices. This phenomena in democracy was for Arendt, a "representative democracy" wherein "the representatives, not the people themselves, have the opportunity to engage in those activities of expressing, discussing and deciding which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom."³² Arendt continued that the political parties are instruments through which "the power of the people is curtailed and controlled—their programmes are ready-made formulas which demand not action but execution; their function is to exclude the masses from public life and their effect is to create widespread indifference to public affairs."³³ She claimed that "representative democracy formally gives the people power without giving them the opportunity of being republicans and of acting as citizens."³⁴ "Representation robs individuals of this right to participate in public life."³⁵ Thus, this has been considered as the negative effect of, or the threat in democracy wherein Representation "prepares the ground for abolishing all legal and institutional guarantees, hears in the voice of the people only an echo of its own voice, and the appeal to the people becomes a mask behind which a new class of political representatives sets itself up in opposition to the people"³⁶ which therefore "inaugurates a world of universal suspicion and denunciation."³⁷

Regarding the dynamics that can be seen in the interaction between the candidates and the voters in the campaign period, Arendt in her essay "Truth and Politics," opens with a reality by saying ". . . no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues"³⁸ because, she continued, "lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician's or the demagogue's but also of the statesman's trade."³⁹ Having classified the truth into two realities which are generally employed in the public realm, as we have discussed in the earlier part of our discussions, Arendt then utilized Hobbes' "contrary faculties"⁴⁰ which are in accordance to the two realities of truth that she has developed. For the rational truth which includes mathematical, scientific, and philosophic truths, she adopted the faculty of "solid reasoning" wherein "it is grounded upon principles of truth."⁴¹ On the other hand, the factual truth engages the faculty of "powerful eloquence" which is "grounded upon

³² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 235

³³ *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁵ Robert Fine, "Notes on Hannah Arendt and the Decline of Human Rights," in *Sociology of Human Rights*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 297.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

opinions, passions, and interests of men which are different and mutable."⁴² Realistically in Philippine politics, candidates who are so careful in putting up their image, appeal to citizens using the means to attract the faculty of powerful eloquence as it is observed that "the triumph of falsity over truth, of injustice over equity, of despair over hope is practically guaranteed on the occasion of Philippine elections."⁴³ It is therefore important that voters be educated in this regard putting into consideration the methods of publicity which candidates employ to appeal to them in order to win their votes or worse, to steal the vote of a more deserving candidate.

Consequently, Arendt discussed the effect of lying wherein she strongly maintained that "the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world is being destroyed."⁴⁴ Thus, the trust of the people, from which their participation springs forth, and from which the primary source of power in a democratic government is taken, collapses. Thus, proving that "consistent lying, metaphorically speaking, pulls the ground from under (one's) feet and provides no other ground on which to stand."⁴⁵ On the contrary, and more importantly, Arendt emphasizes that "all truth—not only the various kinds of rational truth, but also factual truth—are opposed to opinion in their mode of asserting validity"⁴⁶ because "truth carries within itself an element of coercion"⁴⁷ which causes "rational truth (to) enlighten human understanding, and factual truth (to) inform opinions . . . (so that) it is in their very nature to withstand further elucidation, as it is in the nature of light to withstand enlightenment."⁴⁸

Furthermore, it was noticed in the Philippine government that "the constitutional principles of separation of powers among the three branches of government are set aside for politico-reciprocal advantages."⁴⁹ Thus, obtaining political positions in the Philippines (or elsewhere) has always been seen as a situation wherein one earns "advantageous" power. In Arendt's transition towards her conclusion on "Truth and Politics," she pointed out a relevant issue as she emphasized the "transitory character" of power which makes facts superior over it. She asserted that the "transitory character makes power a highly unreliable instrument for achieving permanence of any kind, and, therefore, not only truth

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ CBCP, *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippines Politics*.

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 309.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 310.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 302.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 302.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 304.

⁴⁹ CBCP, *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippines Politics*.

and facts are insecure in its hands but untruth and non-facts as well."⁵⁰ By pointing this out, Arendt did not only caution the citizens of the danger in being uncritical recipients of "facts" that are reported by politicians, but also the politicians, of the danger in trying to manipulate the world.

Conclusion

Having considerably dealt with democracy, truthfulness and some aspects related to them in the previous discussions, this section intends to bring this study into its conclusion by emphasizing the importance of action in Arendt's notion of Responsibility without neglecting the realities of democracy and truthfulness in the Philippine Politics mentioned in the earlier discussions.

Despite the complexity of the discussions regarding truthfulness in politics, despite the necessary lies in a politician's trade, and whether or not a candidate reports a fact, the National Elections, as a manifestation of democracy wherein each citizen is treated as an individual who belongs and acts in a community whose "general will expresses the will of the people only as a singular entity,"⁵¹ should then be participated into. For it is through one's civic participation that one participates in the "web of relationships"⁵² where "responsibility is the link between individual deeds, fellowship, and membership."⁵³ Being "responsible for the consequences of (one's) own act is a kind of collective responsibility that (one) endure(s) like any other fellow citizen."⁵⁴

Arendt distinguishes "taking responsibility" against "assigning responsibility" wherein the former is forward-looking and proactive while the latter is backward-looking, reactive⁵⁵ and is commonly known as the "blame-game." Thus, participation in elections is an action which falls in the distinction of *taking responsibility* because it is in the citizens' responsibility that "as a member of a political community (they) are bound to acknowledge that (they) bear responsibility for things (their) government does in (their) name or supposedly on (their) behalf, even though (they, themselves) have not done those things, and even though the actions may not be connected to any process of authorization that even indirectly links to them."⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 310.

⁵¹ Fine, 5.

⁵² Herzog, 46.

⁵³ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁵ Iris Marion Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* (2004): 378.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 376.

"Action is the political activity par excellence."⁵⁷ Thus, one's non-participation in the National Elections may be considered an inaction in the political realm. Non-participation therefore, is a declaration of indifference despite the responsibility of one's fellow citizen who sought to participate by collectively thinking of the welfare of the nation, by carefully reflecting the past and taking responsibility of the future, and by facing the consequences of his own and the community's action.

Finally, in the context of an election, whether the voter's candidate wins or not, suffering is inevitable—suffering the consequence that one's candidate did not win and so, he should endure the leadership and service of the winning official whom he did not vote for. Regarding this, I deem it relevant to quote Socrates as Arendt did in her essay: "Doing wrong is more harmful than suffering wrong."⁵⁸ Being part of the possible change is better than to suffer the consequence of which you were not even a part of in the process of its becoming.

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⁵⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.

⁵⁸ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 306.

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