



# How to Steal an Election

Vote Buying, Disenfranchisement,  
Corrupt Counting and Faulty Machines



International Observers Mission  
on the 2025 Philippine Elections  
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# Vote Buying, Overseas Voters, and Voting Machines

Three issues have historically plagued elections in the Philippines: vote buying, electronic voting issues, and disenfranchisement of overseas voters. All three of these concerns were well documented in the reports of the 2022 IOM. Throughout this year's 2025 midterm election season, these three issues have continued to impact voters' participation in the elections on a wide scale throughout the country.

## Vote Buying

In 2022, the final recommendation of the IOM report of the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines (ICHRP) stated, "Vote-buying is rampant and since it is illegal, vote-buyers must be apprehended and sanctioned to minimize or eliminate this practice"<sup>1</sup>. Despite being proscribed under Article 22 of the Omnibus Election Code (OEC), which defines vote buying as "giving, offering, or promising money, favors, or jobs in exchange for getting a person's vote for the candidate or causing the person to vote against somebody else", the practice has been and continues to plague Philippine elections.

According to an analysis conducted in 2018, "Vote buying among the poor is indeed very common, but the incidence varies depending on the vote buying type. The most prevalent form uses more benign goods such as

food and clothing, but offers of money is still reported by more than a quarter of respondents. Different vote-buying types also have different correlates, including some socio-economic factors, suggesting that it is a finely targeted activity. In addition, money vote buying is predominant in tight elections, but buying votes using non-monetary offers is more common when there is a clear winner even before the election"<sup>2</sup>.

In 2022, the IOM in Eastern Visayas witnessed vote buying—50, 100, 500 and 1,000 peso bills with the name of the candidates written on them being handed out. Some people received several bills for different candidates. They saw a 'volunteer' supporting one local candidate who had a list of all the voters in one barangay, and who was passing from door to door to give money for his candidate.

As of April 25, this year, the COMELEC reported at least 158 complaints lodged during the campaign season against election candidates for vote buying, vote selling and abuse of government funds and assets<sup>3</sup>. COMELEC Chairman George Erwin Garcia told the media in a message that the poll body had issued 74 show cause orders for vote-buying and/or abuse of state resources allegations so far<sup>4</sup>.

Among those issued show cause orders were Las Piñas Rep. Camille

Villar, who is running for senator; Manila Mayor Honey Lacuna and her rivals Isko Moreno and Sam Versoza; Marikina mayoral bet Stella Quimbo and re-electionist Malabon Mayor Jeannie Sandoval<sup>5</sup>. Another of those under show cause orders was Esmael Magundadatu<sup>6</sup>, the 2010 candidate for Governor of Maguindanao, whose wife and sisters were killed along with 37 journalists in the Maguindanao Massacre, the worst act of election violence in the history of Philippine elections. A small number of candidates have had their campaigns suspended by the COMELEC because of substantiated cases of vote buying.

The persistence of vote buying corrupts the democratic process, and at the same time, is a mirror of the power structures that exist in Philippine society. Mass poverty in the Philippines creates the foundation for vote-buying by rich and powerful elites, and high inequality has led to a well-entrenched political system whereby control of local, regional, provincial and national political positions are a means to self-enrichment and empowerment giving rise to dynasties. The persistence of feudal patron client relations all support the system of vote buying, with a majority of Philippine provinces being led by members of political dynasties<sup>7</sup>. Vote buying is widely perceived as a problem, but only a fraction of those committing it are actually sanctioned by the Comelec.

## **Disenfranchisement of OFWs**

The disenfranchisement of overseas voters begins with the registration process. For the current 2025 poll, there are 1.24 million registered overseas voters. In 2022, despite the pandemic, about 1.7 million<sup>8</sup> registered to vote and participated in the overseas absentee voting (OAV). In 2019, the last time mid-term elections were held, there were 1.82 million overseas voters registered<sup>9</sup>.

The precipitous drop (31.9% since 2019) in registered voters among overseas Filipinos is a significant concern, and speaks to a process which is disenfranchising hundreds of thousands of potential overseas voters. This disenfranchisement has taken place due to difficulties in pre-enrolling online and other technical issues.

Biometrics errors are constant, especially in passport and face identification. For example, the OFWs who reach the 5-minute timeout during registration have to fill everything out over again. According to Tabs Ponciano of Malaya Movement USA, "Our OFWs are already irritated because it's been half a day, they still haven't registered for pre-enrollment"<sup>10</sup>.

The COMELEC's administration of the new internet overseas voting process has also raised concerns about voter

suppression. Many registered voters are still unaware of the online voting system, and that there is a three-step process to voting: 1) registration; 2) pre-enrollment, even for registered voters; and 3) voting. Each step is a complex morass of verification. The COMELEC started the pre-enrollment process on March 20, just a few weeks before online voting began on April 13. This was not enough time to inform overseas Filipinos that they cannot vote if they do not pre-enroll. After considerable lobbying from overseas organizations, the COMELEC extended the deadline for the pre-registration process from May 7 to May 10<sup>11</sup>.

The National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), which specializes in election technology, could not categorically express confidence in the OVCS (Overseas Voting and Counting System). “Outside of the trusted build, we were unable to see the end-to-end test of the OVCS...There was not enough visibility for us to determine what they were doing with the system, and to me, that was a problem<sup>12</sup>,” said Namfrel national chairperson Lito Averia.

Transparency was also a concern expressed by Jona Yang of the Computer Professionals Union, who stated, “Kailangan siguraduhin na may casted vote verification o in simpler terms, resibo, na makikita ng ating mga kababayan kung sino ang kabilang ibinoto, at hindi yung... code

na hindi natin naiintindihan, kumbaga, mababasa lang siya ng computer<sup>13</sup>” (We need to make sure that there is a casted vote verification or in simpler terms, a receipt, so that voters can see who they voted for, and not the code that we don't understand, that can only be read by the computer).

The complexity of the registration process has already resulted in a decade-low level of voter registration among overseas Filipinos. This, combined with the new requirements for pre-enrollment, will likely result in a voter turnout below the normally low participation rate of 40% among OFWs.

### **Integrity of the Electronic Voting System**

In the past, vote counting was painfully slow, and it could take days to declare a victor in many of the races. This led to widespread concerns about fraudulent counts and resulted in the recent move to vote counting machines. However, the voting machines have proven to be less reliable than manual counts. Previous elections have seen power outages, which resulted in the failure of machines, as well as missing ballots at some polling stations. Previous elections have also seen reports of election officials selling victories in some ridings suggesting that the previous voting machines themselves were open to manipulation.

The 2022 IOM report also expressed concerns about the electronic voting system, stating, "The electronic voting system is not transparent. It is not possible to independently audit and verify the vote under the current system of voting"<sup>14</sup>. These remain major concerns for the 2025 elections. The 2022 IOM recommended, "Vote Counting Machines are too unreliable and should be replaced by manual counting, with votes cast being published at the voting centers before results are transmitted to the provincial and national counting centers. The vote counting algorithm must be independently verified as accurate prior to the election. There needs to be a transparent process of verification"<sup>15</sup>.

The new process for vote counting launched in 2025 continues to be criticized for a lack of transparency by poll watchers. According to Tabs Ponciano of the Malaya Movement USA, "Marami naman tayong mga kababayan na hindi rin coders, pero ang nakikita nila, o nare-receive nila after i-submit 'yung kanilang boto, is itong 146-page code containing 'yung ballot content. Ito 'yung confirmation... Hindi siya klaro. Hindi naman siya totoong confirmation of voting. Ilegible siya for most people"<sup>16</sup> (There are many Filipinos who are not coders, but what they see, or receive after submitting their vote, is this 146-page code containing the ballot content. This is the confirmation... It is not

clear. It is not a real confirmation of voting. It is illegible for most people.)

The several weaknesses of this system can be mitigated. The 2025 IOM supports Kontra Daya's push for a "hybrid" method – to hold online transmission of votes, but undertake manual counting. This proposal is to ensure more transparency in the process compared to relying on automated processes both for transmission and counting. Vote Report PH has cited concerns about proprietary source codes for the vote counting machines (VCMs) that lack transparency. The IOM 2025 believes that increasing transparency in the electoral process through measures such as manual counting of electronic votes would serve to improve confidence in the integrity of the system and would improve electoral participation.



## Citations

<sup>1</sup>ICHRP IOM 2022, Final Report of the Philippine Elections 2022: International Observers Mission, June 28th 2022 p. 39.

<https://ichrp.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-06-28-IOM-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Canare, T.A., Mendoza, R.U., Lopez, M.A. (2018). An empirical analysis of vote buying among the poor: Evidence from elections in the Philippines. South East Asia Research, 26(1), 58-84.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.inquirer.net/438238/158-cases-of-vote-buying-vote-selling-abuse-of-govt-resources-filed-dilg/>

<sup>4</sup>Dianne Sampang “4 show cause orders issued for alleged vote-buying, abuse of resources” Philippine Daily Inquirer, April 25, 2025

<sup>5</sup><https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/04/30/2439406/213-bets-face-disqualification-vote-buying>

<sup>6</sup> Sampang, op cit, Apr 25, 2025.

<sup>7</sup><https://ichrp.net/zero-in-dynasties-plague-2025-philippine-elections/>

<sup>8</sup><https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1579736/by-the-numbers-more-voters-in-2022-than-in-previous-polls>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.statista.com/statistics/981917/philippines-number-total-registered-overseas-voters/>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/4/30/groups-raise-alarm-on-tech-issues-inadequate-info-dissemination-on-online-voting-1657>

<sup>11</sup>Republic of the Philippines Commission on Elections, Memorandum 250714 May 5, 2025

<sup>12</sup><https://www.rappler.com/philippines/elections/overseas-filipinos-fear-disenfranchisement-internet-voting/>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/4/30/groups-raise-alarm-on-tech-issues-inadequate-info-dissemination-on-online-voting-1657>

<sup>14</sup>ICHRP IOM 2022, op cit p.39

<sup>15</sup>ICHRP IOM 2022, op cit p.39

<sup>16</sup><https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/4/30/groups-raise-alarm-on-tech-issues-inadequate-info-dissemination-on-online-voting-1657>