

Enhancing Marian Voters' Education by Faith and Votes: How Bloc Voting Shapes Marian Students' Electoral Freedom

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of religion and electoral behavior in the Philippines continues to raise concerns about voter autonomy, particularly among youth voters. This research examined how collective voting practices influence the political independence of university students affiliated with various religious groups. Using a descriptive-comparative design, a structured questionnaire was administered to 360 registered student voters from different academic departments and religious affiliations within a diverse university community. The study assessed students' alignment with legal provisions on suffrage, their behaviors toward coordinated voting behaviors, and the degree of perceived influence exerted by religious and social groups. Quantitative data were analyzed using t-tests and ANOVA to explore variations in perception based on academic background, sex, and religious affiliation. Findings revealed that participants strongly support constitutional provisions on suffrage and reject electoral misconduct. Participants generally disagreed with the practice of bloc voting and it was perceived as moderately influential, with respondents acknowledging its effect on electoral outcomes and the social pressure it creates. No significant differences were found in perceptions based on academic program or sex; however, religious affiliation showed a notable impact on perceived influence. The findings revealed a clear tension between upholding community unity and exercising personal choice. In response, the study proposed an educational initiative that encourages reflective decision-making and enhances awareness of electoral rights. The research offers valuable insight into how institutional, cultural, and spiritual contexts shape student voters' behavior, contributing to broader discussions on promoting informed and autonomous participation in democratic processes.

Keywords: awareness of electoral rights, collective voting practices, electoral behavior, political independence, religion, social pressure, voter autonomy

INTRODUCTION

As an impressionable group, young people are highly susceptible to social pressure and community influence. This exposure often complicates their individual autonomy when exercising the right to vote. The influence of peer groups, schools, and religious circles often leads young people to cast votes that reflect group expectations rather than their own authentic beliefs. This undermines the integrity of their suffrage. On a larger scale, the accumulation of these misguided votes can lead to significant societal consequences as individual choices merge into a larger, collective trend.

Bloc voting, for instance, a widespread and generational practice among Iglesia ni Cristo faithfuls, remains a strong factor in defining the votes of its church members, most especially the youth. This shows that while religious engagement and identification can increase political participation among youth, this could also lead to pressure affecting their electoral behavior (Alcantara, et al., 2022). Young voters often face pressure from strict church practices to align their political actions with their religious community to preserve their sense of belonging. While many find personal meaning and identity in these teachings (National Church Life Survey, 2021), the resulting sense of obligation can overshadow independent political judgment (Shirley, n.d.).

In a society where religion profoundly shapes political life, understanding how these institutional 'directions' affect individual suffrage is vital.

While current research suggests a relationship between religious affiliation and political practice among the youth, this study aims to fill the gaps left in terms of the more intricate details along the varied experiences of youth voters, especially those with strong alignments to their faith. This study then sought to address these gaps by offering a more comprehensive understanding of how religious beliefs shape electoral practices in the Philippine context.

With this goal, the study examined how different religious denominations perceived and influenced the practice of bloc voting, and to explore the implications of these perceptions for the electoral freedom of their adherents. Specifically, the study was designed to investigate the position of Marian participants with regard to their freedom to vote. It sought to determine the level of agreement of these participants concerning beliefs about the practice of bloc voting. It also examined the extent to which the bloc voting system influenced the voting preferences of the participants. Moreover, it assessed whether there were significant differences in the participants' positions on bloc voting, their level of agreement on the practice, and the degree of influence it exerted, when they were grouped according to school, sex, and religious affiliation. Lastly, based on the salient findings, the study aims to create a voter education material that contributes to the protection of democratic rights within religiously diverse academic communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a descriptive-comparative quantitative design to evaluate the influence of bloc voting on students' electoral freedom. The descriptive aspect identified patterns in perceptions and behaviors, while the comparative approach analyzed differences across demographic groups. The research was conducted at Saint Mary's University, a Catholic institution with a religiously diverse student population. A total of 360 registered student voters, affiliated with various religious denominations including INC, Catholicism, Protestantism, and others, participated in the survey. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure balanced representation.

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire composed of items measuring respondents' agreement with constitutional voting rights, attitudes toward bloc voting, and perceived levels of influence. The questionnaire was grounded in legal texts such as the 1987 Constitution and the Omnibus Election Code, and guided by Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes observational learning, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism. The tool underwent expert validation and achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.735, indicating acceptable reliability.

Data collection was carried out through both online and printed surveys between March and April 2025. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-tests, and one-way ANOVA to identify significant differences in responses based on school, sex, and religious affiliation. The Likert scale used ranged from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" and "Not Influential" to "Very Influential."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Section 1. Positions of Marian students with regard Freedom to Vote

Results revealed that Marian students exhibit a strong and consistent agreement with the constitutional provisions on suffrage, as well as the prohibitions outlined in the Omnibus Election Code. Across various statements related to voter qualifications and rights, the participants rated highly on key indicators such as the sanctity of the ballot (mean = 3.70), the necessity of voter education (mean = 3.73), and the importance of providing assistance to voters with disabilities (mean = 3.53). The overall mean score for constitutional provisions was 3.41, which falls under the “Agree” category, indicating broad support for the inclusive and democratic principles enshrined in the 1987 Constitution.

In the same way, respondents strongly supported the prohibitions under the Omnibus Election Code. All statements relating to electoral misconduct, such as vote-buying, bribery, coercion by religious leaders, and intimidation, gathered “Strongly Agree” ratings. The highest mean score (3.74) was recorded for the belief that the government must ensure fair voting practices for all, while statements such as “No leader or official of any religious group should pressure, threaten, or force their members to vote for any candidate” also received high levels of agreement (mean = 3.64). The overall mean for this section was 3.68, demonstrating not only awareness of illegal practices but a clear moral position against them.

These findings imply that Marian students understand both their voting rights and the legal protections in place to protect them. Their responses indicate that the student body is not only well-informed, but also ethically committed to democratic values. The high level of agreement with legal prohibitions such as coercion and vote-buying suggests that students are concerned about issues that could jeopardize the legitimacy of elections. This demonstrates their opposition to electoral manipulation, whether through material incentives or religious-political influence. Despite this solid foundation, students reported only moderate agreement when asked if there is “enough information about voting rights and how to vote,” implying that while values are present, voter education structures may be lacking or inconsistent.

The findings are consistent with those of De Guia (2021), who emphasized the role of suffrage in promoting participatory governance. The students' strong position on both voting rights and prohibitions echoes De Guia's assertion that suffrage must be based not only on entitlement but also on ethical considerations.

Furthermore, the findings add to the discussion presented by Tolentino (2022), who emphasized the Philippines' obligation under international treaties such as the ICCPR to maintain universal and equal suffrage. This study demonstrates that students understand and embrace those rights, even within a religiously affiliated institution. Unlike previous research, this study reveals an important finding: while students support legal and ethical electoral principles, they still perceive gaps in voter education, indicating a disconnect between belief and preparedness. This adds a new dimension to the literature by demonstrating that even well-informed students may feel inadequately equipped to fully exercise their rights, highlighting the need for institutional reinforcement of voter education through accessible and ongoing programs.

Section 2. Level of Agreement of the Marian Participants on the Beliefs About the Practice of Bloc Voting

The respondents generally disagreed with beliefs supporting bloc voting. They rejected the ideas that the church knows better on political matters, that bloc voting leads to informed

decisions, or that it preserves democratic fairness. The item with the highest agreement, however, acknowledged that bloc voting creates pressure to conform. This contrast suggests that while students ideologically reject bloc voting, they recognize its continued influence in real-life situations due to communal and religious expectations.

This suggests an important distinction between belief and behavior. Students are intellectually aware that bloc voting undermines democratic autonomy, yet they remain socially and culturally immersed in networks where conformity is frequently promoted or expected. The impression of bloc voting as a source of pressure rather than guidance demonstrates how it operates less as a group decision-making process and more as a subtle control mechanism. This acknowledgement of pressure, rather than agreement with its principles, indicates the internal battle that students face between faith-based loyalty and individual conscience.

Previous research, such as that of Martinez and Ubaldo (2011), frequently focused external coercion in bloc voting, but did not address how students perceive this as internalized social pressure rather than overt orders. This study adds to our knowledge of how youth, particularly those in religious academic environments, navigate bloc voting not by blind obedience, but through a tug-of-war between group identification and individual political will. This is an important difference that emphasizes the complexities of religious-political impact in modern youth situations, which earlier research has frequently oversimplified.

Section 3. Level of Influence of Bloc Voting System to the Voting Preferences of Marians

While the majority of students disagreed with bloc voting ideologically, they rated it as moderately influential in practice. All statements under this section received mean scores that fall within the "Influential" category, with an overall mean of 2.87. The item with the highest score was "Bloc voting affects the outcome of elections" (mean = 3.30), indicating students perceive bloc voting as a significant force in shaping electoral results. This was followed closely by items stating that bloc voting creates pressure to conform to church or group preferences (mean = 3.20) and that it leads to internal conflict when personal and group choices do not align. Students also acknowledged that bloc voting could influence them to vote based on fear of social consequences, such as judgment or exclusion from religious peers or communities.

These data suggest that bloc voting continues to influence youth decision-making through subtle and internalized communal pressure. This has a significant influence on election integrity since the right to vote is not fully exercised when people are afraid of being disapproved of or losing their sense of community. It suggests a more complicated type of influence, one that acts silently and relationally rather than through explicit demands.

Earlier studies, such as Alcantara et al. (2022), stressed that religion enhances voter involvement, but this study expands on the analysis by demonstrating that such engagement may still be degraded in quality. Voting "under pressure" does not constitute free participation. What distinguishes this study is its demonstration that youth voters are aware of the emotional mechanisms employed to sustain bloc voting, and that this awareness does not always translate into resistance. This idea closes a critical gap by demonstrating how bloc voting power is maintained not just by tradition, but also by subtle social reinforcement that may survive even in democratic situations.

Section 4. Comparison in the Position of Marian Participants on Bloc Voting, Their Level of Agreement on the Practice of Bloc Voting, and Level of Influence when Grouped According to Different Profile Variables

The comparative analysis examined differences in students' positions on suffrage, bloc voting beliefs, and the perceived influence of bloc voting across three demographic variables:

academic school, sex, and religious affiliation. The results showed no statistically significant differences across academic programs or schools, suggesting that the students' academic disciplines had no meaningful effect on their positions or experiences regarding electoral autonomy and bloc voting. Likewise, sex did not produce significant differences in agreement with bloc voting beliefs or its perceived influence. However, female students showed significantly higher agreement with the constitutional provisions of suffrage, indicating a stronger alignment with democratic values among female respondents.

The most notable and statistically significant difference was observed in terms of religious affiliation. Specifically, respondents from Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) displayed a significantly higher level of agreement with beliefs supporting bloc voting compared to other religious denominations. While all groups shared moderate levels of perceived influence, INC respondents were more likely to agree with the idea that bloc voting is a legitimate practice and that religious groups should guide members in their political choices. In contrast, Catholic, Protestants and other students tended to disagree with such beliefs and emphasized individual discernment and conscience in the voting process.

This significant variation suggests that religious tradition influences not just young voters' conduct but also their political perspective. In the context of INC students, their strong support for bloc voting ideas is consistent with the church's well-documented practice of centralized and mandatory voting. This represents a theological stance that views bloc voting as a religious responsibility rather than a personal political choice. As a result, members may internalize this practice as both spiritually and communally required, molding their perspective on political engagement. Students from more individualistic religious traditions, such as Catholicism, Protestantism and others, seem to emphasize conscience, personal thought, and democratic freedom, all of which are more in line with liberal democratic norms.

These findings are consistent with Tolentino's (2016) research, which identified the INC's practice of bloc voting as a form of spiritual obedience related to church unity. Similarly, Harper (2017) described bloc voting in the INC as a political representation of religious solidarity. However, what this study adds to previous research is the perspective of students themselves, who confirm by their own responses that such doctrinal influence is still active and assimilated in their society. The moderate yet noticeable influence of bloc voting demonstrates the need for continued voter educational reform and the creation of safe spaces where students can freely express and exercise their political autonomy.

Moreover, the study's findings also have implications for university administrators and policy makers. Educational institutions should integrate targeted voter education modules into the curriculum, particularly in faith-based universities, to address the unique pressures students may face. For policymakers, the results call for stricter implementation of the Omnibus Election Code's provisions against coercion by religious groups and the promotion of awareness campaigns that emphasize independent, conscience-driven voting.

By strengthening critical thinking, self-efficacy, and awareness of electoral rights, institutions can cultivate a generation of voters who participate not out of obligation or fear, but out of informed beliefs.

Conclusion

This study found that while Marian students strongly support democratic principles and reject unethical electoral practices, many still experience social and religious pressures that influence their voting behavior. The findings revealed that bloc voting, particularly among members of Iglesia ni Cristo, remains a moderately influential force, despite students' general disagreement with the practice. Importantly, religious affiliation, not sex or academic

background, emerged as the key factor shaping perceptions and experiences of electoral autonomy.

The key takeaway is that even in a university setting where voter education is emphasized, the influence of religious authority continues to challenge the full exercise of individual political freedom. Students are aware of their rights but may find it difficult to assert them in the face of institutional religious expectations. The implications for practice are significant. For education, it highlights the need to go beyond legal literacy and focus on building students' self-efficacy and critical thinking to resist social pressures. For university administration, this calls for the integration of rights-based and values-oriented civic education programs. For policymakers, the findings support targeted voter education initiatives and enforcement of election laws.

In summary, promoting electoral freedom in a faith-influenced society requires not only legal protections but also educational strategies that empower individuals to act independently and responsibly within their communities.

Recommendations

For Saint Mary's University and other Academic Institutions, they may incorporate more structured civic reflection spaces into its academic and extracurricular programs, as many Marian students support the constitutional right to free suffrage but are still exposed to traditional bloc voting practices in their communities. These forums can be scholarly symposia, interdisciplinary voter education seminars, or student-led, moderated conversations where students can freely address the conflict between political autonomy, culture, and faith. This will strengthen their moral judgment and critical thinking, particularly in situations when cultural or religious traditions can contradict democratic values.

For local government unit policymakers, they may support legislation that protects voters from indirect coercion or psychological pressure in any form, especially from institutions or organizational voting endorsements.

Religious organizations may also reconsider how to maintain a balance between religious unity and individual political freedom, especially those who actively support bloc voting. Although many faiths place a strong emphasis on obedience and unity, leaders should be aware of how their younger members' viewpoints are changing. During elections, religious advice can continue to have an impact while respecting each member's autonomy to make their own decisions. Faith and democratic integrity would be strengthened if conscience-driven participation were encouraged instead of bloc orders being enforced.

For Marian voters, it is recommended that they support and defend autonomy, especially when it comes to resisting community or religious-imposed voting restrictions. Students may, where appropriate, start campus forums or peer-led discussions that oppose coercive practices and encourage moral civic participation and to actively participate in voter education programs and discussions organized by the university or credible organizations, and to seek accurate information about candidates and issues, in order to deepen their understanding of electoral rights and the importance of resisting undue influence.

Finally, future researchers may replicate this study in other educational institutions, including non-Catholic schools and diverse communities, in order to compare levels of agreement on bloc voting beliefs and uncover additional influencing factors and may make further studies on the importance of socio-political and civic engagement among the youth, especially in terms of suffrage, and how their holistic development can be encouraged within the formal learning setting.

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