



ATENELO



ICSI



PHILIPPINE OBSERVATORY ON DEMOCRACY TOPLINE REPORT



Disclaimer: This *Philippine Observatory on Democracy (POD) Topline Report* is a draft work-in-progress made publicly available to stimulate discussion and critical comment. The purpose is to mine the reader's additional ideas and contributions to inform the development of full research papers.

The data presented in this report are preliminary and primarily based on initial descriptive analyses of the survey results. These findings offer an early overview of emerging trends and patterns related to civic engagement and democratic participation. More rigorous inferential analyses are still underway and will be incorporated into full research papers to be generated by the POD project. These forthcoming studies will offer a more robust understanding of the relationships between key variables and provide broader implications for policy and practice.

Suggested Citation: Philippine Observatory on Democracy (POD). 2025. "A Weakening Attachment to Democracy? Less Than Half of Filipinos Prefer Democracy Today; Understanding Philippine Democracy in Key Urban Cities." Draft report. Available at: <https://bit.ly/PODToplineReport>, accessed [Date].

Table of Contents

1	Introduction
2	Far from Ideal: Only 31% of Urban Filipinos View Democracy in the Country as Ideal
3	How Do Urban Filipinos Understand Democracy? Different Perceptions and A Preference for Authoritarianism → <i>Filipinos Ascribe Democracy with Freedom, But Also Equality and Chaos</i> → <i>Perceptions of Democracy with Historical Events and Figures Hint at A Different Story</i> → <i>Majority Prefer Democracy, But Many Prefer an Authoritarian Government</i>
7	What are the main challenges faced by PH democracy? Declining Democratic Pillars and Contrasting Experiences → <i>Corruption and Fake News Perceived as Top Problems of Democracy</i> → <i>Contrasting Experiences on Democratic Access</i> → <i>Weaponization of Social Media</i> → <i>Perception of Political Dynasties</i>
11	What Do Filipinos Aspire for in A Democracy? A Focus on Social Rights and A Stronger Leader → <i>A Preference for A Strong President</i>
12	What's Next? Urban Filipinos Vote During Elections, But Majority Do Not Engage in Civic Discussions Beyond → <i>Declining Civic Participation Beyond Elections</i>
15	Annex

A Weakening Attachment to *Democracy*?



Less Than Half of Filipinos Prefer Democracy Today
Understanding Philippine Democracy in Key Urban Cities
By The Philippine Observatory on Democracy Consortium

Introduction



Democracy is facing increasing challenges globally

Evidence¹ suggests that threats to democratic institutions worldwide are growing, including the rise of authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and the spread of disinformation. In response, the International Association of Jesuit Universities launched the Global Observatory on Democracy in 2022. This initiative examines democratic trends in key regions and explores ways to defend democracy and foster civic engagement.

The Philippine Observatory on Democracy (POD) was established as part of this global effort. The POD is a consortium of Ateneo institutions—Ateneo de Naga, Ateneo de Manila, Xavier University-Ateneo de Cagayan de Oro, Ateneo de Davao, and Ateneo de Zamboanga—working in partnership with Simbahang Lingkod ng Bayan and the John Carroll Institute of Social Order.

In the Philippines, studies reveal mixed views on democracy

While many Filipinos report satisfaction with the democratic system,² empirical indices from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)—a globally recognized research institute that produces one of the most comprehensive datasets on democracy—reveal a marked decline in the electoral, liberal, and participatory aspects of democratic institutions in the Philippines.³ This apparent disconnect raises critical questions: How do Filipinos perceive democracy today? What underlying nuances inform their perceptions of democracy?

1 Freedom House. (2023). *Freedom in the World 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy*. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf

2 SWS. 2023. "Social Weather Report | A record-high 89% are satisfied with the way democracy works; 60% always prefer democracy to any other kind of government."

3 Kasuya, Y., & Calimbahin, C. A. A. (2024). Democratic backsliding in the Philippines: Are voters becoming illiberal?. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 9(1), 121-132.

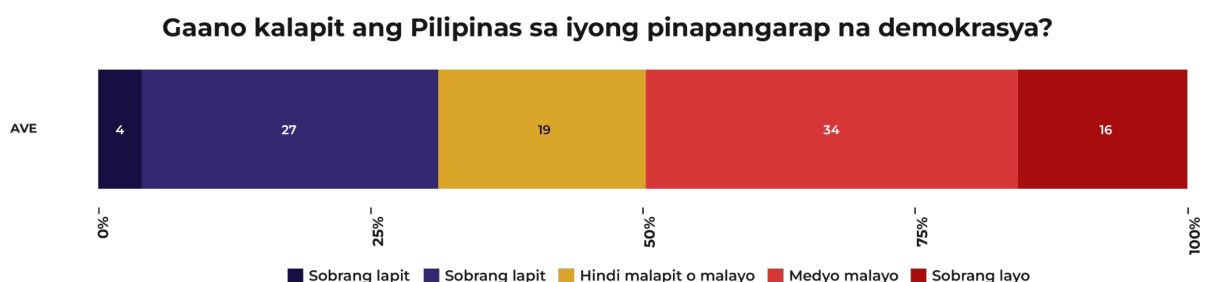
To answer these questions, the POD conducted a multi-city survey in 2024, focusing on key urban centers with existing POD research teams: Naga City, Metro Manila, Cebu City, Cagayan de Oro City, Davao City, and Zamboanga City. The survey used a multi-stage random (probability) sampling design with results representative of Filipinos aged 18 and above in these cities with an average margin of error at $\pm 5.2\%$ at a 95% confidence level. The first stage selection of the sampling design was a cluster sampling of barangays in each city through Probability Proportional to Size (PPS). The second stage selection was a systematic area sampling of households in the selected barangays while a respondent was randomly selected in each selected household.

A total of 842 respondents were surveyed. The survey was conducted from December 2 to 21, 2024 through Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) across selected households. Throughout this report, we refer to the target population — Filipinos aged 18 and above in Naga City, Metro Manila, Cebu City, Cagayan de Oro City, Davao City, and Zamboanga City — as “Urban Filipinos”. However, we note that the “Urban Filipinos” in this report do not include Filipinos living in other urban areas outside the key study areas.

The findings presented in this report provide valuable insights into how Filipinos define and experience democracy today.

Far from Ideal: Only 31% of Urban Filipinos View Democracy in the Country as Ideal

When asked how close the Philippines is to their ideal state of democracy, only 31% of Urban Filipinos said the nation meets their expectations, while 50% described it as far from ideal. Similarly on another question, only 38% of urban Filipinos expressed satisfaction with democracy at the country level.



To better understand this level of satisfaction among urban Filipinos, it is essential to explore what democracy means to them. By examining their perceptions and expectations, we can gain a deeper understanding of the factors driving low satisfaction levels.

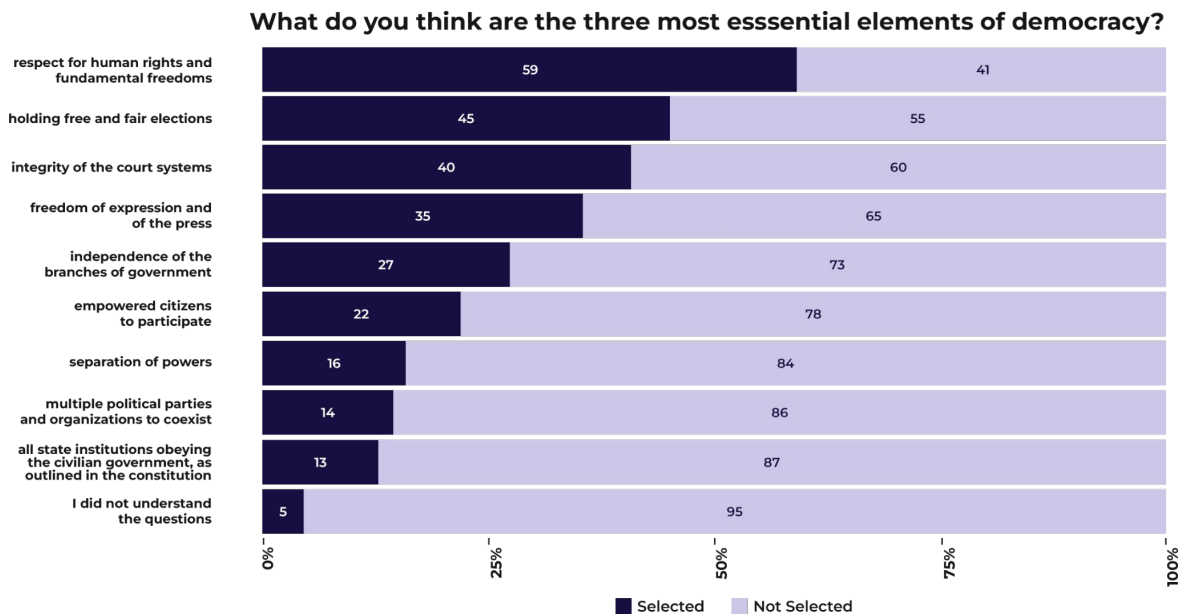
How Do Urban Filipinos Understand Democracy? Different Perceptions and A Preference for Authoritarianism

➔ **Filipinos Ascribe Democracy with Freedom, But Also Equality and Chaos**

While democracy as an ideal remains closely tied to concepts of liberty and freedom, perceptions of it are starting to be associated with new critical concepts. When asked what first comes to mind upon hearing the word "democracy," *kalayaan* (freedom) remains the most common response, followed by government and equality (*pagkakapantay-pantay*). However, there are some associations with negative terms, such as *chaos* (*kaguluhan*).



Urban Filipinos identify human rights and fundamental freedoms as one of the most essential elements of a democracy, followed by free and fair elections and the integrity of the court system. Despite these strong ideals, perceptions of democracy in relation to historical events and key governance figures hint at a different story.

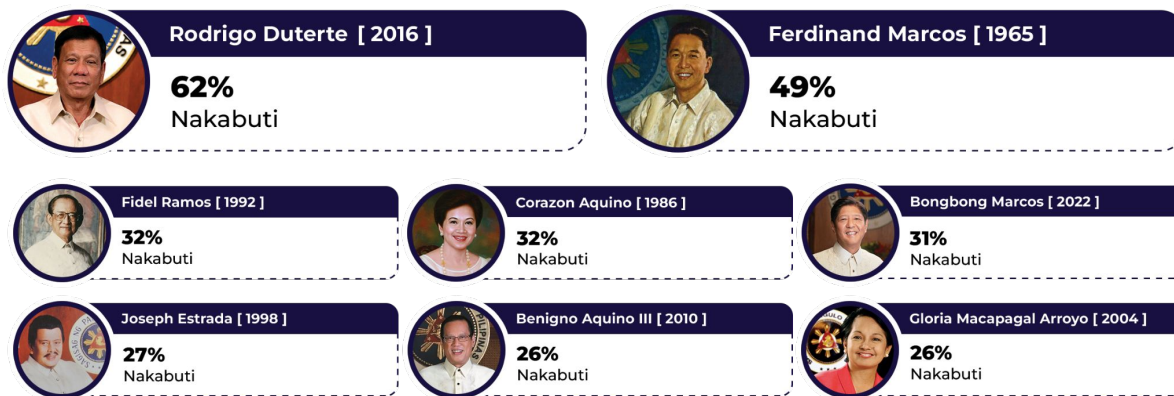


➔ Perceptions of Democracy with Historical Events and Figures Hint at A Different Story

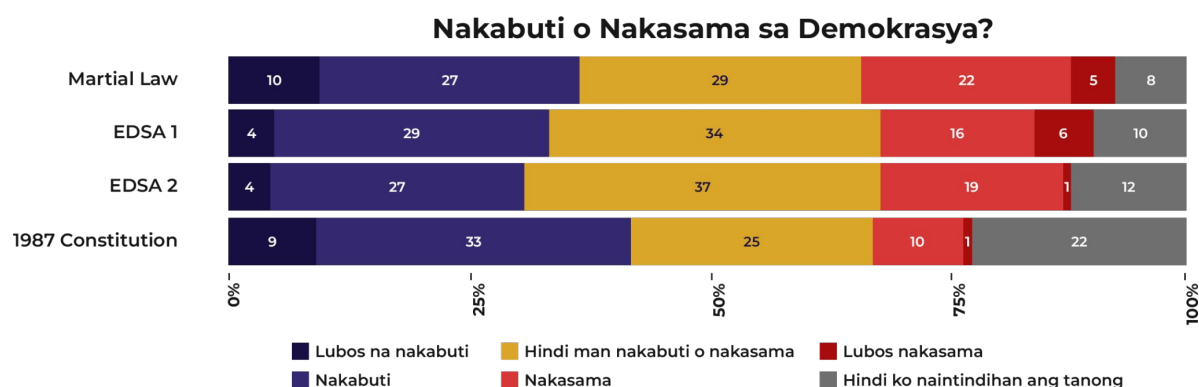
When asked which presidents had a positive impact on democracy, **Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and Rodrigo Duterte** emerged as the figures with the highest proportions of *nakabuti* (beneficial) responses — with **49% for Marcos Sr. and 62% for Duterte**. However, analysts suggest that the regimes of both leaders are widely documented for serious abuses of democratic principles—Marcos Sr., for suppressing civil liberties under Martial Law, and Duterte for widespread human rights abuses associated with the anti-illegal drug campaign.

While more than half of urban Filipinos identified respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as among the most essential elements of democracy, their perception of these leaders suggests a possible disconnect. Studies⁴ show that the record of these leaders and events does not necessarily align with democratic ideals Filipinos describe. Yet, they are still viewed as significant contributors to the country's democratic landscape.

4 Human Rights Watch. (n.d.). *Philippines' 'War on Drugs'*. Retrieved April 28, 2025, from <https://www.hrw.org/tag/philippines-war-drugs>



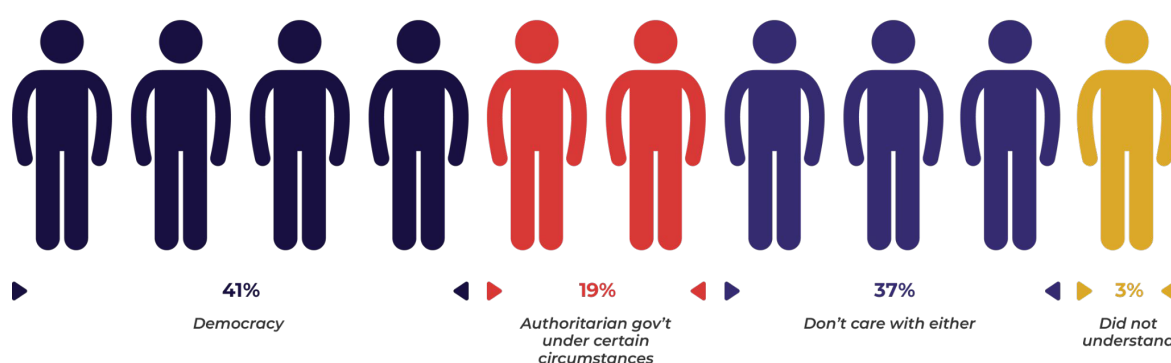
Furthermore, **only 33% believe that the EDSA I Revolution** — a pivotal event in ending Martial Law in the Philippines — had a beneficial effect on Philippine democracy. This paradox highlights the evolving and often contradictory ways in which democracy is understood and valued in the Philippines.



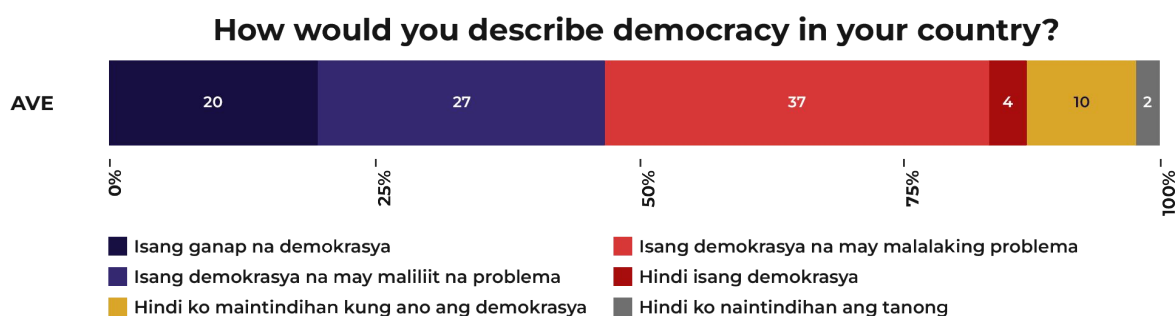
➔ Majority Prefer Democracy, But Many Prefer an Authoritarian Government

While democracy remains the preferred form of government, support for a **democratic type of government stands at a modest 41%**. Notably, 37% of urban Filipinos express indifference to the type of government, suggesting a weakening attachment to democratic forms of governance. Strikingly, 19% of urban Filipinos prefer an authoritarian government given certain circumstances.

Democratic vs. Authoritarian



When asked about the current state of Philippine democracy, nearly half perceive the country as a democracy with minor to no issues. However, 37% describe it as a democracy with major problems. Notably, **10% admit to not understanding democracy at all**.



These data suggest a potential disconnect between how Filipinos conceptualize democracy and how they evaluate its practice through historical events and national leaders. Next, we delve into the potential challenges to democracy that may have shaped current perceptions about democracy and governance.

What are the main challenges faced by PH democracy? Declining Democratic Pillars and Contrasting Experiences

➔ Corruption and Fake News Perceived as Top Problems of Democracy

When asked about the top three biggest problems in the functioning of democracy, urban Filipinos expressed deep concerns about government and media accountability. More than 50% of respondents identified corruption and the spread of fake news and disinformation as major issues. Nearly half considered misinformation a pressing concern. Around one in five respondents also identified bureaucracy and nepotism as among the biggest problems of today's democracy.

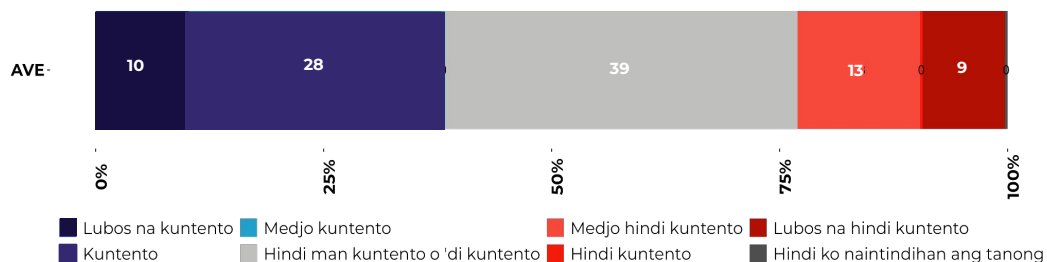
Top Three Biggest Problems in the Functioning of Democracy



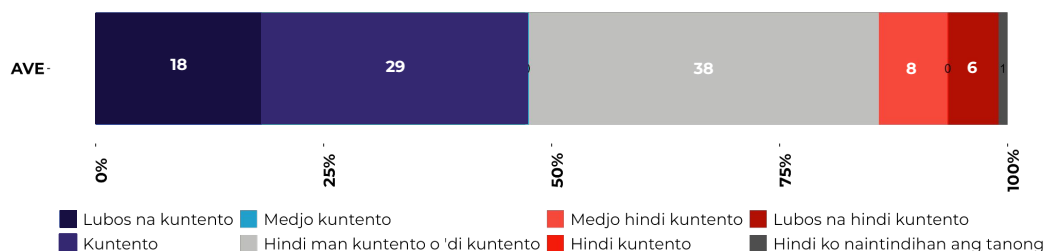
Sa iyong opinyon, ano ang tatlong pinakamalaking problema na humahadlang sa pagtakbo ng demokrasya?

➔ Contrasting Experiences on Democratic Access

Satisfied with the functioning of democracy in your country?



Satisfied with the functioning of democracy in your municipality?



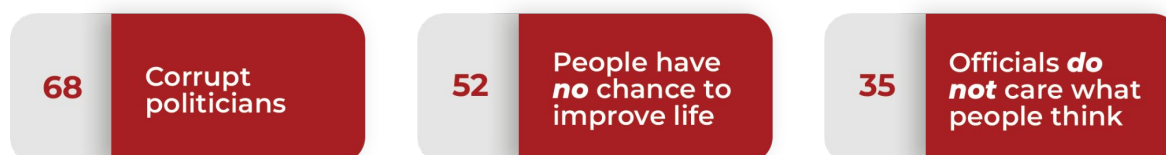
Another challenge is the deep inequality in perceived democratic rights. When asked about their reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy in their cities, urban Filipinos expressed polarized views. Interestingly, both satisfied and dissatisfied respondents pointed to the same top factors: the presence or absence of corrupt politicians, the state of the economy, and the opportunities for social mobility and improving one's life. This polarization not only reflects how personal experiences shape perceptions of democracy, highlighting the stark divisions in how Filipinos experience and view the quality of governance, but also how the wider political, economic, and social conditions affect these perceptions.

Top 3 Reasons for Satisfaction with democracy in city



- 32 Not corrupt politicians
- 31 Officials care what people think
- 22 Key institutions are working adequately
- 20 Fair court system
- 13 Right to express views in public is protected
- 10 Diverse political parties coexist
- 0 Did not understand

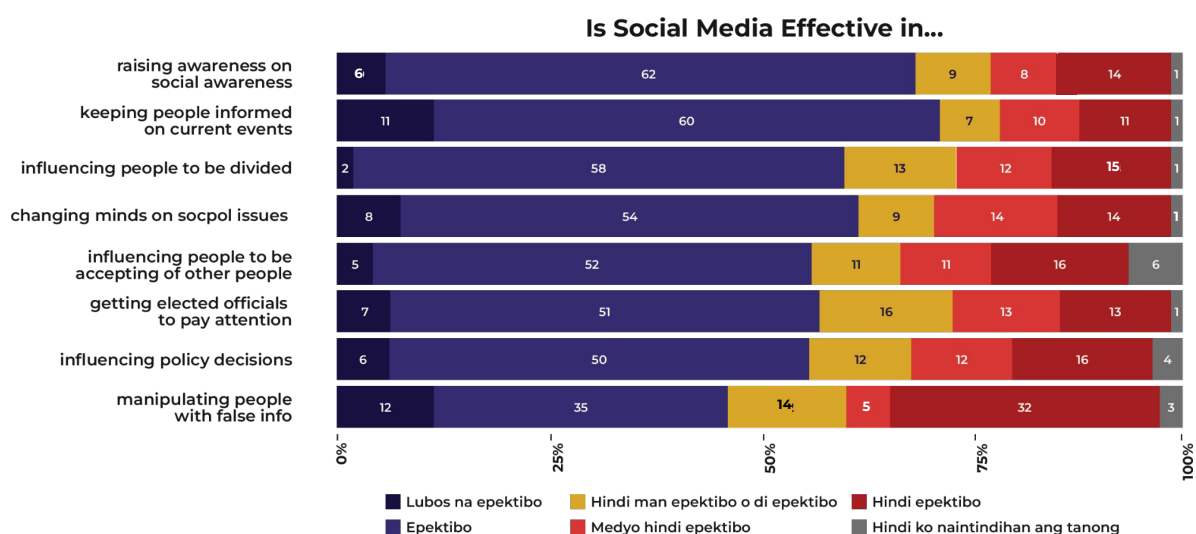
Top 3 Reasons for Dissatisfaction with democracy in city



- 30 Econ situation is bad
- 25 Right to express views in public is not protected
- 20 Unclean elections
- 4 Unfair court system
- 1 Key institutions are **not** working adequately
- 0 Did not understand

→ Weaponization of Social Media

The weaponization of social media further complicates the democratic landscape. While fake news and misinformation are recognized as two of the most pressing threats to democracy, **only 47% of urban Filipinos believe social media is an effective tool for manipulating public opinion.** This finding suggests that while many are aware of the issue, they may not see themselves as personally susceptible to fake news.



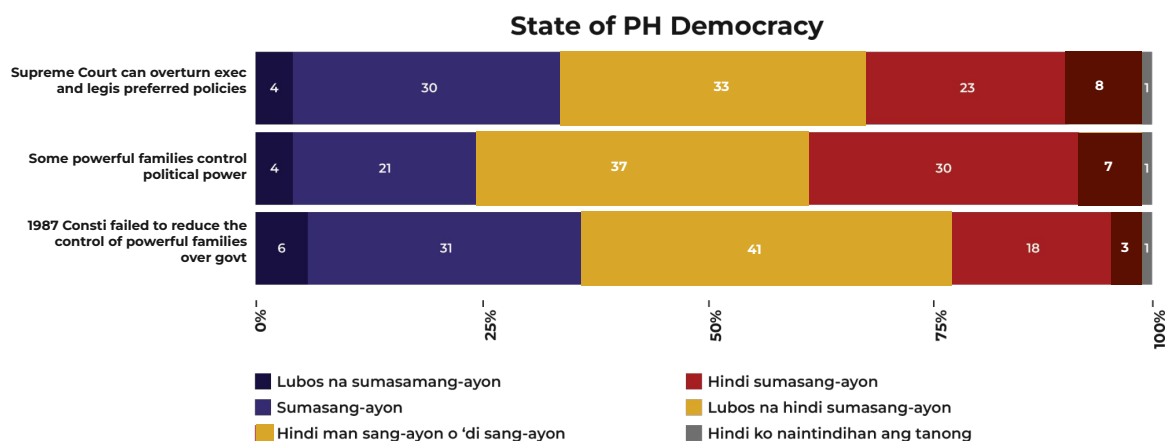
This finding is consistent with a separate study by the Ateneo Policy Center, which shows that frequent exposure to fake news produces a paradoxical effect: it improves the ability to identify real news by 9.9%, but simultaneously increases susceptibility to believing misinformation by 5.5%. Among the youth, heightened awareness of misinformation does not necessarily lead to greater vigilance; it can instead normalize fake news, leading to greater acceptance of both accurate and false information.

This possible low level of self-awareness may diminish the perceived need for fact-checking and critical evaluation of information, ultimately making the public more vulnerable to disinformation campaigns.

5 Deinla, I. B., Mendoza, G. A. S., Ballar, K. J., & Yap, J. K. (2022). The link between fake news susceptibility and political polarization of the youth in the Philippines. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 30(2), 160-181.

➔ Perception of Political Dynasties

Despite the long-standing dominance of powerful families in Philippine politics, a large proportion of urban Filipinos disagree with the notion that political power is concentrated in the hands of a few families. This perception may downplay the perceived persistence of political dynasties. Without an institutional recognition of this issue, efforts to introduce electoral reforms and promote fair competition remain challenging.



Despite the challenges facing Philippine democracy, urban Filipinos still hold views on what democracy should look like. Their concerns about corruption, misinformation, and declining civic participation are met with aspirations for stronger institutions, effective leadership, and greater social protection. Now, we dive deeper into the hopes and aspirations of urban Filipinos for the future of democracy.

What Do Filipinos Aspire for in A Democracy? A Focus on Social Rights and A Stronger Leader

When asked about the most urgent aspects for the functioning of Philippine democracy, urban Filipinos prioritize social protection, competitive elections, and economic rights. However, civil liberties, a top element associated with democracy in a previous question, were given notably less importance across all surveyed regions. This highlights a possible divergence between Filipinos' conceptual understanding of democracy and practical priorities that shape their expectations of democratic governance.

Urgent for the functioning of PH democracy

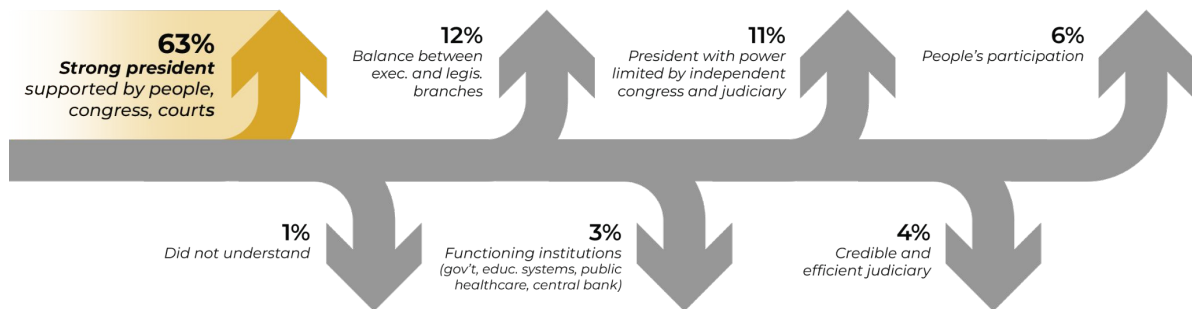


Alin sa mga sumusunod na aspeto ang itinuturing mong urgent para sa paggana ng demokrasya sa iyong bansa?

→ A Preference for A Strong President

Given multiple paths to improve Philippine democracy, a great majority of urban Filipinos (63%) favored a strong president supported by people, Congress, and courts — over other paths like limiting Presidential power, balance between branches, functioning institutions, credible and efficient judiciary, and people's participation. If start looking at regional nuances, this preference for strong executive leadership is consistent across regions, with the exception of Davao and Zamboanga, where distinct perspectives emerged. In Davao, a slightly higher proportion of respondents believe that maintaining a balance across government branches would better uphold democracy. Meanwhile, in Zamboanga, a significantly larger share of respondents supports the idea of a president limited by other branches of government as the ideal model for strengthening democratic governance. Nonetheless, urban Filipinos and Davao and Zamboanga overwhelmingly prefer having a strong president — with 50% in Davao and 45% in Zamboanga preferring this path.

Which of the following would make democracy work better?



These insights suggest that regional nuances play a significant role in shaping how Filipinos envision democracy. In the next section, we'll take a closer look at these regional perspectives to uncover the factors behind the mixed views on democracy and governance among urban Filipinos.

What's Next? Urban Filipinos Vote During Elections, But Majority Do Not Engage in Civic Discussions Beyond

➔ Declining Civic Participation Beyond Elections

Survey respondents report a sharp decline in civic participation outside of elections. Although nearly all urban Filipinos report voting in national elections, participation slightly drops during mid-term elections. Moreover, engagement in other political activities remains notably low. Relatively fewer people frequently discuss politics with family and friends. Further, although about a quarter report being members of political parties, participation in high-barrier activities, for example attending local meetings or joining protests, is even rarer. This aligns with the top elements of democracy more linked to one-time elections versus long-term civic participation.



Deliberative democracy entails the engagement of people as equals in shaping policies that affect their lives. Without such dialogue, meaningful political engagement and accountability weaken. Thus, a narrow focus on elections in political participation among urban Filipinos may be concerning.

→ **Call to Action: Drive Civic Engagement Beyond Elections**

A core objective of the Philippine Observatory on Democracy is to ensure that the results of the survey are translated into actionable insights through practical discussions. From March to April 2025, the POD Consortium has been holding regional brown bag sessions to discuss the findings with the academe, policy makers, and civic organizations. This year, the POD consortium will continue to analyze the data, deepen our understanding of the results, and, together with our civic partners, transform insights into action.

This year, the Consortium will continue to analyze the data more deeply and, in partnership with civic organizations, translate these insights into meaningful action. Each participating Ateneo institution will further explore the data through inferential and qualitative analysis, focusing on key themes such as social media, polarization, civic engagement, and public perception of presidents, among others. These deeper dives aim to uncover more nuanced insights and provide greater context to the trends observed in our topline findings.

The next step is to move beyond these circles and bring the conversation to a wider audience through public forums such as barangay assemblies and community dialogues. This democratization of knowledge can only be achieved through continued collaboration with civil society organizations.

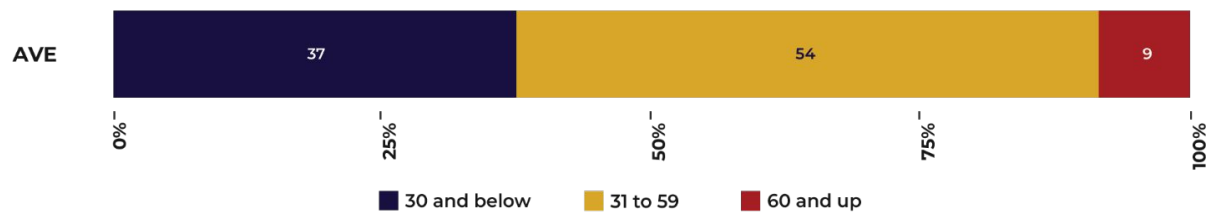
Together, these efforts aim to strengthen democratic culture and deepen public participation in shaping our nation's future.

Annex

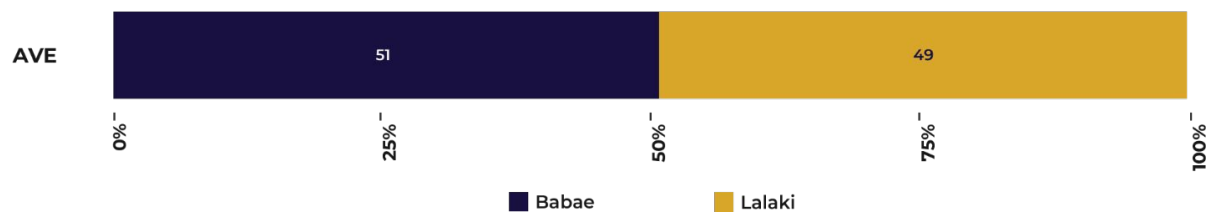


Annex. Demographics

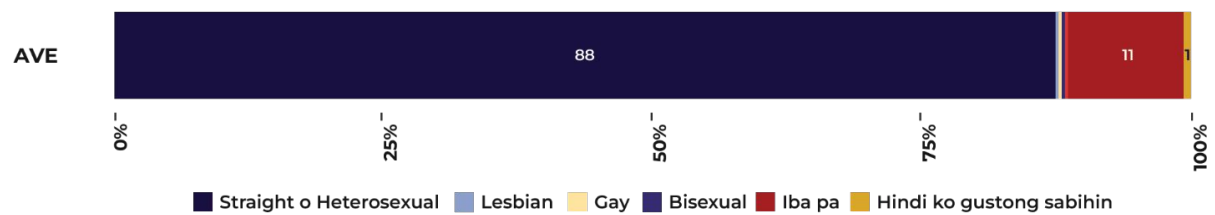
Age Group Distribution



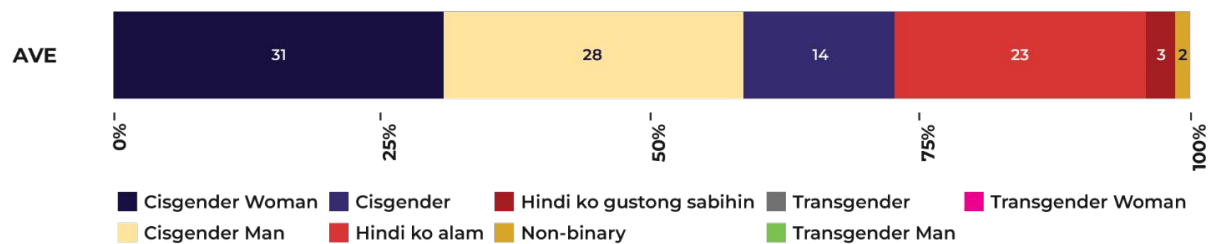
Sex at Birth Distribution



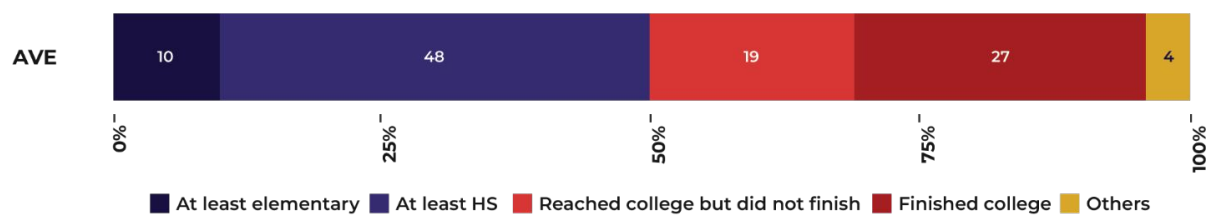
Sexual Orientation



Gender Identity



Educational Attainment



PHILIPPINE OBSERVATORY ON DEMOCRACY
Ateneo School of Government
2025

