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Enhancing Electoral Integrity: A Comparative Analysis of Electoral Processes in Selected Provinces of Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), Philippines

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Abstract

This study delves into the electoral practices within the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) of the Philippines, specifically examining Abra, Kalinga, and Mountain Province. It employs Punctuated Equilibrium Theory to understand how political institutions and decision-making processes shape election outcomes, with a particular emphasis on fostering peaceful elections. The research assesses the awareness, observance, and performance of key electoral participants: COMELEC officials, candidates, and voters, while also evaluating the government's handling of election-related challenges. The findings reveal that stakeholders across all three provinces generally possess a high level of awareness regarding principles that support peaceful elections, such as the significance of voter education. However, the observance of these principles is often inconsistent. For instance, respect for voter choice and adherence to the directives of traditional elders are less consistently practiced, indicating a disconnect between knowledge and action. Although the performance of electoral stakeholders is generally rated positively, challenges persist in mobilizing voters, frequently due to security concerns. This highlights the critical need for enhanced security measures and initiatives aimed at building trust. Furthermore, government responses to election problems do not always align with the perceived severity of the issues, suggesting a need for more strategic and responsive interventions. In Abra, which remains an election hotspot, respect for candidates is high, yet adherence to traditional elder guidance is low, reflecting the ongoing tension between modern electoral practices and traditional norms. Kalinga and Mountain Province, no longer categorized as hotspots, exhibit similar patterns: high awareness but persistent challenges concerning voter choice and traditional norms. Socio-cultural factors, such as respect for elders and clientelism, continue to influence electoral practices, even amidst modernization and institutional reforms. The study recommends strengthening voter education, improving electoral security, enhancing government accountability, and promoting collaborative governance. It proposes replacing the term "election hotspot" with "province of interest" to mitigate negative connotations and suggests rotating COMELEC and security personnel to prevent undue local influence. Future research should investigate the impact of social media and misinformation and explore voter experiences in greater depth.

Keywords: Punctuated Equilibrium Theory; Electoral Practices; Peaceful Elections; Cordillera Administrative Region, Voter Awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Election observation, as highlighted by the United Nations, is a fundamental mechanism for safeguarding electoral integrity. It plays a pivotal role in identifying and rectifying procedural errors, deterring electoral fraud, and strengthening public confidence in democratic systems (UN Women, 2005). This study adds to the existing body of knowledge by evaluating the enforcement of electoral laws and regulations across the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) provinces in the Philippines, with a particular emphasis on fostering peaceful electoral environments.

The research employs a comparative approach to analyze electoral practices within the CAR, utilizing the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory as its analytical lens. This theory posits that policy processes typically undergo extended periods of stability, which are occasionally disrupted by brief, intense episodes of change, driven by the interplay of political institutions and bounded

rationality (Bendor et al., 2011). This perspective is particularly useful for understanding the dynamic nature of electoral governance in the region. Electoral processes are central to democratic development. Drawing from Aristotelian philosophy, politics is regarded as an intrinsic aspect of social existence (Ayson & Reyes, n.d.). Ellis (2009) further emphasizes that electoral processes are deeply intertwined with other elements of democratic governance, necessitating comprehensive reforms. However, the persistence of election-related violence incidents (ERVIs) poses a significant threat to the consolidation of democracy. While such challenges are not unique to the Philippines (Mutch, 2010), their frequency underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions. The complexities inherent in direct democracy, as noted by Garrett and McCubbins (2010), require robust mechanisms to ensure that electoral outcomes genuinely reflect the informed will of the electorate.

The Philippines continues to grapple with issues undermining election integrity, with electoral violence being a recurrent concern. For instance, during the 2016 national elections, the Philippine National Police (PNP) identified 260 cities and towns as election watch list areas (EWAs), many of which had a history of electoral violence (Barrientos-Vallarta, 2016). This reality highlights the ongoing threat to the credibility and peacefulness of elections. At the heart of protecting the electoral process is the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), an independent constitutional body tasked with overseeing all aspects of elections (Republic Act No. 7166, 1991). The effectiveness of COMELEC is not solely dependent on enforcing compliance through penalties but also on cultivating a "compliance pull"—a normative commitment to doing what is right, which is essential for achieving genuinely peaceful and credible elections (Etienne & Wendeln, 2003).

Although the CAR is generally recognized for its relative tranquility, it has not been entirely immune to ERVIs, prompting the PNP to designate certain areas as politically sensitive (PNP, 2016). The Omnibus Election Code defines ERVIs within a specific timeframe, yet their impact often lingers, leaving lasting effects on affected communities.

In contrast to these challenges, Benguet province stands out as a model of peaceful elections. This success is largely attributed to its distinctive cultural values and strong social cohesion (Palangchao, n.d.). Benguet's experience offers valuable insights and serves as a benchmark for other regions striving for more harmonious electoral processes.

This study specifically focuses on Mountain Province, Kalinga, and Abra – provinces with a history of electoral violence. By analyzing these areas, the research aims to identify best practices and formulate effective strategies to enhance their electoral processes. This includes adopting successful approaches from Benguet, as demonstrated in the study "Peaceful Electoral Process in the Province of Benguet: An Assessment." The recent 2022 national elections and the upcoming 2025 midterm elections underscore the urgency of understanding current electoral processes and pinpointing necessary improvements to maintain their integrity and effectiveness.

The study thoroughly examines and compares electoral practices across these selected CAR provinces, applying the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory to understand the dynamics of policy implementation and change. It also rigorously evaluates the level of compliance with electoral laws and regulations. A significant aspect of the research is the exploration of socio-cultural influences, particularly the role of community elders and traditional values, in shaping electoral behavior and outcomes. Ultimately, this research supports several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most notably SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. This goal seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, ensure access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at every level (United Nations, 2015). By addressing the complexities of electoral processes and the persistent challenge of violence, this study directly contributes to the achievement of these critical global objectives.

LITERATURES

Importance of Democratic Electoral Process. Democratic elections are essential to modern governance, providing a key mechanism for societies to achieve collective self-determination and fair distribution of power. Central to democracy is the principle that legitimate authority arises from the consent of the governed – a concept that has inspired transformative movements and profound sacrifices worldwide (Shah, 2002). The enduring desire for self-governance, liberty, and justice has driven humanity toward more inclusive political systems. However, the path to democracy is challenging; the 20th century, often called "the century of war," reflects the ongoing tension between democratic ideals and realities of conflict, political instability, and social discord. This tension underscores the complexity of establishing and sustaining genuine democratic systems.

While elections are indispensable, they represent only one part of a broader democratic framework. Elections allow citizens to express preferences, choose leaders, and hold power accountable. Yet, a vibrant democracy requires more. Diamond (2004) identifies four pillars crucial to democratic governance: free and fair elections, active citizen participation, protection of human rights, and the rule of law. Free and fair elections ensure every vote counts; citizen participation extends beyond voting to engagement and oversight; human rights protect individual freedoms; and the rule of law holds everyone, including leaders, accountable. Together, these elements distinguish authentic democracies from those that only appear democratic.

However, elections alone do not guarantee effective governance. Madgstadt and Schotten (1999) note that converting citizen preferences into policy is complex, influenced by diverse interests and political expediency. Bendor et al. (2011) stress elections' vital role as a check on power, enabling citizens to hold leaders accountable and maintain a responsive government, even if policies don't perfectly reflect every individual's wishes.

Suffrage: The Cornerstone of Popular Sovereignty. Suffrage, or the universal right to vote, is fundamental to democratic elections and embodies the core of popular sovereignty—the principle that political power ultimately belongs to the people. Each eligible voter, by casting a ballot, contributes to the collective will that shapes government and society's future. As explained in "Nature of the Right of Suffrage" (2009), suffrage ensures the continuity of government through legitimate, peaceful means, providing a structured process for leadership transitions that helps maintain social order and stability.

It is important to distinguish suffrage from broader civil rights. While civil rights cover a wide range of individual freedoms and protections, suffrage specifically relates to political participation (McCafree, 2012). Eligibility to vote may depend on criteria such as age or residency, but ideally, these should be inclusive to guarantee broad participation. For suffrage to genuinely reflect the popular will, voting must be free and uncoerced. Voters should cast their ballots based on personal conviction, without intimidation, manipulation, or undue influence. This freedom is essential to uphold democratic ideals and ensure elections truly represent the independent choices of the people, reinforcing the legitimacy and integrity of the political system.

Contemporary Challenges to Electoral Integrity. Despite the enduring appeal of democratic ideals, modern elections face significant challenges that threaten their integrity. One major concern is electoral authoritarianism, a concept explored by Levitsky and Way (2010), describing regimes that maintain the appearance of democratic elections while manipulating processes to secure ruling party dominance. This manipulation includes controlling media, suppressing opposition, gerrymandering districts, and committing electoral fraud. Such tactics reveal the difference between procedural democracy—holding elections—and substantive democracy, which ensures civil liberties, judicial independence, and genuine rule of law. Without these protections, elections become hollow

rituals that legitimize authoritarianism rather than empower citizens.

Digital technology has introduced new threats like disinformation and cyber warfare. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) highlight how false narratives, fake news, and targeted propaganda spread via social media can polarize societies, erode trust, and manipulate voters. Cyberattacks on electoral infrastructure further risk compromising election integrity. To counter these threats, strengthening cybersecurity and promoting media literacy are essential to help citizens critically assess information and resist manipulation. Traditional electoral abuses also persist. Voter suppression – through restrictive ID laws, limited polling hours, or intimidation – and partisan gerrymandering continue to disenfranchise marginalized groups and distort representation (Keyssar, 2000). These practices undermine fair competition and accountability. Addressing them requires ongoing efforts to guarantee equal voting access and implement independent redistricting. Vigilance and proactive reforms are vital to uphold the democratic principle of "one person, one vote." Diplomatic Elections and Constitutional Guarantees Diplomatic elections fundamentally rely on strict compliance with electoral laws and regulations. This adherence is not just bureaucratic; it's essential for upholding democratic principles and maintaining public trust. When elections meticulously follow legal frameworks, they gain legitimacy, reflecting the genuine will of the electorate. This applies to every stage, from registration to tabulation. Any deviation or perceived malpractice can erode trust, foster cynicism, and even spark unrest, imperiling democratic stability.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution exemplifies this commitment. Article V, Section 1, guarantees suffrage to all qualified citizens, explicitly precluding literacy, property, or other substantive requirements. This inclusive approach champions universal suffrage, ensuring participation is not limited by socio-economic status or education. This constitutional guarantee aligns with John Locke's (1943) concept of individual liberty within a commonwealth governed by established laws, where legitimate government derives from the consent of the governed. By removing voting barriers, the Philippine Constitution reinforces the Lockean ideal of an accountable government, where every citizen's voice contributes to the collective good. This constitutional strength safeguards democratic participation, fostering an inclusive and representative political landscape.

Benguet's Model for Peaceful Elections: A Deep Dive. In a world where electoral violence and political discord often make headlines, the province of Benguet in the Philippines stands out as a beacon of peaceful democratic practice. Benguet's reputation for tranquil elections is not a mere coincidence; rather, it is deeply rooted in the province's unique cultural values, social dynamics, and a collective commitment to harmony. Benguet's peaceful elections are a direct result of its people's dedication to peace, respect for elders, and a nuanced approach to political competition (Binaldo-Velasco, 2016). Unlike many regions where elections are marked by rivalry and sometimes violence, Benguet offers a model in which political ambitions are pursued within a framework of community cohesion and mutual respect.

A Culture of Peace and Restraint. At the heart of Benguet's electoral peace is its distinctive cultural temperament. The people of Benguet are widely known for their calm, composed, and discreet demeanor, which significantly contributes to the serene atmosphere during elections. Atty. Delmar Cariño, a notable commentator, points out that leadership contests in Benguet differ markedly from the aggressive "warlordism" seen elsewhere in the country. Instead, political leaders in Benguet display a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, even in the midst of competition. Mr. Apolinario Bagano, a former executive assistant in the Governor's office, highlights the humility and simplicity of Benguet's people – traits that naturally diffuse tension and foster a less confrontational political environment.

A significant aspect of Benguet's political culture is its aversion to political dynasties.

While not legally mandated, this sentiment is consistently reflected in the electorate's choices. Voters in Benguet prefer diverse leadership and actively avoid concentrating power within a single family. This practice ensures regular political renewal and prevents the formation of entrenched power structures that can breed corruption. Moreover, Benguet's voters are discerning and hold their leaders to high standards, expecting them to uphold traditional values and the wisdom of community elders. This alignment fosters trust and contentment, creating a stable political landscape where consensus and community well-being are prioritized over partisan divides.

The Role of Elders and Traditional Values. Community elders and traditional values play a pivotal role in maintaining Benguet's peaceful elections. Interviews with respected elders like Mr. Aurelio D. Placido reveal that, in Benguet, political affiliations are often secondary to kinship and community ties. Candidates prioritize harmonious relationships, recognizing that community bonds are more enduring than political differences. This approach allows for a more organic and less contentious political process, emphasizing social cohesion over rigid party structures.

Respect for elders is a cornerstone of Benguet's electoral traditions. Elders act as custodians of peace, reminding the community that politics should be about service, not conflict. As Atty. Cariño notes, Benguet's tradition of peaceful elections dates back to the early 20th century. Elders' guidance ensures that political competition remains non-violent, preventing the kinds of electoral violence seen elsewhere.

Rejection of "Warlordism" and Violence. Perhaps the most defining feature of Benguet's peaceful elections is its absolute rejection of "warlordism" and armed intimidation. The province is free from private armies and vigilante groups, and any candidate who resorts to violence faces strong electoral backlash. This cultural aversion to political violence is deeply ingrained, shaping voting behavior and reinforcing Benguet's reputation as a model for peaceful elections.

Legal Framework. The Philippine electoral legal framework is a comprehensive system designed to ensure free, fair, and credible elections. It is anchored in the 1987 Constitution, which created the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) as an independent body responsible for administering and enforcing election laws nationwide. COMELEC's broad mandate safeguards the integrity and smooth conduct of elections. This mandate is detailed in key laws, especially the Omnibus Election Code (Batas Pambansa Bilang 881), which consolidates election regulations covering voter registration, campaign rules, election day procedures, and dispute resolution to prevent fraud and uphold credibility. Other important statutes include Republic Act No. 7166 (1991), which introduced synchronized national and local elections and campaign finance reforms, and the Local Government Code (Republic Act No. 7160), which outlines local government roles in election logistics and security.

The Voter's Registration Act (Republic Act No. 8189) ensures accurate voter lists through strict registration procedures. The Automated Election System Law (Republic Act No. 9369, 2007) modernized elections by mandating automation, with ongoing improvements in cybersecurity and transparency. The Supreme Court also shapes election law through its rulings. Together, these laws create a multi-layered framework balancing efficient, modern elections with democratic integrity. Compliance involves not just avoiding penalties but embracing a "compliance pull" that guides election officials' decisions. COMELEC issues updated guidelines for each election cycle, including the 2022 national and 2025 midterm elections, adapting to new challenges and technologies to maintain electoral integrity.

Indigenous Electoral Process. Indigenous peoples, as original inhabitants with deep historical ties to pre-colonial societies, possess unique cultural, social, and political traits, including distinct languages and customary laws (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, n.d.). Their traditional knowledge is vital for peacebuilding, offering conflict resolution methods focused on

restorative justice, reconciliation, and community healing, often emphasizing mediation over confrontation (Lederach, 1997). These culturally appropriate practices enhance legitimacy and address root causes of conflict, such as land disputes, through sustainable resource management (Posey, 1999). Indigenous communities also serve as bridges between conflicting parties, using their authority and networks to foster dialogue and trust, making recognition of their rights essential for lasting peace.

In the Philippines' Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), indigenous conflict resolution practices like "tong-tong" or "kali" remain central. These emphasize consensus and community participation, promoting social harmony. Elders, who hold both community and spiritual leadership, heavily influence the electoral landscape, blending traditional and formal politics. "Tong-tong" mediates political disputes and helps prevent violence, highlighting traditional governance's role in social cohesion. This hybrid governance model (Boege et al., 2009) builds bonding social capital that encourages cooperation (Putnam, 2000). However, challenges such as vote-buying, bribery, intimidation, and violence – often linked to patron-client dynamics (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007) – undermine democracy. The interaction between indigenous governance and formal elections in CAR calls for nuanced approaches that respect traditional strengths while addressing electoral challenges to ensure free and fair elections.

METHODS

Research Design. To fully analyze the electoral process in the different provinces in Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), descriptive survey research was used since it described the prevailing conditions or situations during the different stages of the election period. It further described and explained the conditions of the present electoral process of the above stated provinces. This descriptive method best assessed the level of awareness and level of agreement of the respondents as the indicators would determine if the electoral process is

diplomatic in the selected provinces. The level of performance of personnel involved in election duties as well as the seriousness of problems encountered by the respondents were also assessed.

Population and Samples. The data for this study was collected from a total of 300 respondents and informants across the provinces of Abra, Kalinga, and Mountain Province in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). Recognizing the nuanced nature of electoral practices and human behavior within this context, a purposive sampling approach was employed. This non-probability sampling method involved the careful selection of individuals known to possess substantial information and insights relevant to the study's objectives, ensuring the collection of rich and meaningful on electoral process.

The demographic profile of the 300 respondents reveals a diverse composition across several key categories. Age-wise, the largest group falls within the 26–35 years range, comprising 41% (123 respondents), followed by those aged 36–45 years at 26% (78 respondents). Younger adults aged 18–25 account for 15.3% (46 respondents), while individuals aged 45–55 make up 16.3% (49 respondents). Older age groups, 56–65 and 66 and above, represent a small fraction, at 1% and 0.3% respectively.

Regarding sex, males constitute a majority at 57.7% (173 respondents), while females make up 42.3% (127 respondents). In terms of civil status, slightly more than half of the respondents are single (51.7%, 155 respondents), with married individuals accounting for 47% (141 respondents), and widowed respondents comprising 1.3% (4 respondents). Looking at electoral roles, the majority are voters, representing 84.3% (253 respondents). Candidates make up 13% (39 respondents), and canvassers form a small group at 2.7% (8 respondents).

Geographically, the respondents are evenly distributed across three provinces in the Cordillera Administrative Region: Abra, Kalinga, and Mountain Province, each contributing

exactly one-third of the sample (33.3%, 100 respondents each). This balanced demographic distribution provides a comprehensive representation of the population involved in the electoral process within these provinces.

The data was taken from different stakeholders of electoral process in the provinces of Abra, Kalinga and Mountain Province namely, public school teachers who usually act as board of canvassers, electorates, staff of the COMELEC, electoral candidates and the winning electoral candidates. The respondents are purely from the registered voters of the said provinces in CAR.

Contemplating the qualitative design of this study, interviews were as well conducted to supplement the data collected from the questionnaires. Observation was as well exploited to corroborate the answers of the respondents and informants. This is to reinforce and evaluate findings over a broader scale.

Reliable books, journals and articles were utilized in this study to further elaborate the findings of the study. Previously conducted studies were also considered as sources of this study to add facts to this study.

Instrument. The researcher utilized a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire to gather the pertinent data of the study. For purposes of reliability, the drafted questionnaire was pretested by using respondents who were not included during the actual conduct of the study. For the validity of the questionnaire, it was enhanced by an expert review to accommodate their corrections, suggestions and comments.

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's Alpha across four parts, indicating high reliability. Part I, assessing awareness and observance of indicators for a diplomatic electoral process in the Cordillera Administrative Region, showed alpha values of .848 and .894 for two related sections, reflecting strong consistency. Part II, evaluating the performance of local COMELEC staff based on the Omnibus Election Code, achieved a high alpha of .903. Part III, measuring

the seriousness of problems encountered by COMELEC during elections, had the highest reliability at .928. Part IV, assessing COMELEC's actions on these problems, also demonstrated strong consistency with an alpha of .885. These results confirm the questionnaire's reliability in capturing respondents' perceptions. For the respondents in the other provinces of the CAR, the researchers employed the assistance of trusted persons and friends who were reimbursed for their expenses. These friends were instructed to conduct interview on some of the respondents to supplements or clarify the items and data collected from the questionnaire. Some elected officials, voters and elders were interviewed to provide substantial information on the research.

Analysis of Data. The data analysis for this research was meticulously designed to directly address its core objectives: assessing the awareness, observance, and performance of electoral stakeholders, and evaluating the government's response to election-related problems. Quantitative data, primarily derived from questionnaires, formed the backbone of this analysis.

Initially, weighted mean was computed for each item, serving as the fundamental descriptive statistics. These means were then interpreted against a predefined five-point scoring rubric, allowing for a clear categorization of the extent of awareness, observance, and performance (e.g., "Very High," "Moderately Performed") and the degree of seriousness of problems and actions taken. This systematic approach provided precise measures for how well each objective's facet was being met from the respondents' perspective.

To move beyond description, a one-sample T-test was subsequently applied. This inferential statistical technique allowed the researchers to determine if the obtained weighted means for specific indicators were statistically significantly different from a hypothesized or ideal mean. For instance, it could ascertain whether the observed level of voter awareness was statistically lower or higher than an expected benchmark. This rigorous analysis

thus provided empirical evidence to confirm or challenge assumptions related to stakeholder engagement and problem resolution, offering data-driven answers to the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Extent of awareness on the principles of peaceful electoral process. The study found a generally high level of awareness among respondents in Abra, Kalinga, and Mountain Province regarding principles that promote peaceful electoral processes. The average mean score of 3.53 indicates that most respondents are well-informed about factors that enhance electoral conduct throughout election periods. Notably, the educational attainment of the electorate was perceived as the most important factor, with a mean score of 3.85, closely followed by the educational level of electoral candidates. However, some indicators—such as "respecting voter's choice during elections," "adherence to warlordism," and "existence of tribal/indigenous conflict resolution"—received lower mean scores, reflecting moderate awareness. This suggests gaps in understanding or applying these principles in practice. For example, in Abra, an election hotspot in 2016, respondents strongly valued voter education but showed only moderate awareness of respecting voter choice. This gap may partly explain the province's history of election-related violence, indicating that while respondents grasp the theoretical importance of respecting voter decisions, real-world factors like political pressure or weak enforcement hinder its practice.

Similar patterns appeared in Kalinga, where voter education was highly valued, but respect for the winning candidate showed only moderate recognition, hinting at vulnerabilities in post-election acceptance. These findings align with scholars like Campbell (2006) and Kenny (2017), who emphasize that an educated electorate and a strong civil society are crucial for healthy democracies.

Benguet's reputation as a model of peaceful elections offers a valuable contrast. Its success

has prompted proposals to use Benguet and Baguio City as pilot areas for developing nationwide election peace strategies (Palangchao, 2016). However, transferring this model requires careful consideration of each province's unique sociocultural and political context. Future research should explore how Benguet's cultural values and social cohesion contribute to its peaceful elections and how these elements might be adapted in other regions.

Table 1
Mean distribution on the extent of awareness relative to the principle of a peaceful electoral process

Principles	Abra	V.I.	Kalinga	V.I.	Mt. Province	V.I.	A.M.	V.I.
1. Educational attainment of the electorate	3.86	HA	3.88	HA	3.80	HA	3.85	HA
2. Educational attainment of the electoral candidate	3.68	HA	3.77	HA	3.74	HA	3.73	HA
3. High respect of the electoral candidates on the directives of the elders on electoral process (very patriarchal)	3.62	HA	3.70	HA	3.66	HA	3.66	HA
4. Abhorrence toward warlordism (no private armies/guns)	3.30	MA	3.29	MA	3.39	MA	3.33	MA
5. Existence of Tribal/indigenous settlement of conflict	3.19	MA	3.29	MA	3.32	MA	3.27	MA
6. People's adherence to peace and order	3.64	HA	3.72	HA	3.60	HA	3.65	HA
7. Voter register on the schedule provided by the government	3.49	HA	3.56	HA	3.52	HA	3.52	HA
8. Respect to the electoral candidates	3.63	HA	3.67	HA	3.73	HA	3.68	HA
9. Compliance on Election campaign rules and regulations under Omnibus Election Code	3.34	MA	3.34	MA	3.57	HA	3.42	HA
10. Respecting voter's choice during election	3.17	MA	3.22	MA	3.41	HA	3.27	MA
11. Respecting winning elected official	3.27	MA	3.20	MA	3.47	HA	3.31	MA
12. Supporting official elect	3.65	HA	3.63	HA	3.71	HA	3.66	HA
Average Mean (A.M.)	3.49	HA	3.52	HA	3.58	HA	3.53	HA

Extent of observance on the principles of electoral Process. Respondents across the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) generally reported a high level of observance regarding principles that support peaceful electoral processes. Among these, respecting electoral candidates received the highest mean score, followed by adherence to peace and order, and respect for voters' choices. These findings, detailed in Table 2, offer valuable insights into why provinces such as Kalinga, Mountain Province, and Apayao were removed from the election hotspot list during the 2016 Philippine polls. The high perceived observance suggests that constituents in these areas have internalized and practiced behaviors conducive to peaceful elections, reflecting normative compliance – where adherence stems from a belief in the legitimacy of norms rather than fear of sanctions.

However, caution is warranted in interpreting these results. High perceived observance does not necessarily imply the absence of electoral irregularities or tensions. Social desirability bias may lead respondents to overstate positive behaviors. Further qualitative research, including interviews and focus groups, would provide a deeper understanding of actual practices and experiences. Notably, "respecting voter's choice" ranked third, indicating room for improvement. While candidates may be respected, voters might feel their choices are not fully honored, highlighting the need for ongoing efforts to strengthen electoral integrity.

In the broader political and social context of CAR, the delisting of certain provinces is positive but does not guarantee future electoral stability. Continuous monitoring is essential to sustain peaceful elections. The high respect for candidates suggests a local political culture that values harmony among contenders, potentially reducing confrontational politics – a dynamic worth exploring further.

Table 2
Mean distribution on the extent of observance relative to the principle of a peaceful electoral process

Principles	Abra	V.I.	Kalinga	V.I.	Mt. Province	V.I.	A.M.	V.I.
1. Educational attainment of the electorate	3.57	HO	3.50	HO	3.73	HO	3.60	HO
2. Educational attainment of the electoral candidate	3.47	HO	3.50	HO	3.75	HO	3.57	HO
3. High respect of the electoral candidates on the directives of the elders on electoral process (very patriarchal)	3.32	HO	3.34	HO	3.53	HO	3.40	HO
4. Abhorrence toward warlordism (no private armies/guns)	3.57	MO	3.55	HO	3.71	HO	3.61	HO
5. Existence of Tribal/indigenous settlement of conflict	3.44	HO	3.49	HO	3.65	HO	3.53	HO
6. People's adherence to peace and order	3.69	HO	3.82	HO	3.81	HO	3.77	HO
7. Voter register on the schedule provided by the government	3.60	HO	3.67	HO	3.79	HO	3.69	HO
8. Respect to the electoral candidates	3.89	HO	3.86	HO	3.92	HO	3.89	HO
9. Compliance on Election campaign rules and regulations under Omnibus Election Code	3.68	HO	3.63	HO	3.72	HO	3.68	HO
10. Respecting voter's choice during election	3.75	HO	3.71	HO	3.83	HO	3.76	HO
11. Respecting winning elected official	3.55	HO	3.55	HO	3.77	HO	3.62	HO
12. Supporting official elect	3.52	HO	3.51	HO	3.80	HO	3.61	HO
Average Mean (A.M.)	3.59	HO	3.59	HO	3.75	HO	3.64	HO

In contrast, Abra – still an election hotspot in 2016 – showed high regard for candidates and voters' choices but low observance of candidates adhering to elder directives, revealing tensions between traditional authority and modern electoral practices. This is reflected in divergent views among residents, from calls for strict electoral guideline enforcement to suggestions of martial law to curb violence, illustrating the province's complex electoral challenges.

Similarly, Kalinga and Mountain Province respondents reported strong respect for candidates but low adherence to elder directives, with Mountain Province showing the highest average observance (mean 3.92). Atty. Delmar Cariño attributes improvements in these provinces to technological and educational advancements, particularly among younger voters, signaling a generational shift from traditional elder influence. This aligns with modernization theory, which links education and technology to evolving political attitudes.

Commission on Election (COMELEC) efforts, such as pacifying tribal conflicts, arms surrender programs and promoting non-violent election commitments—have also contributed positively to principles like opposition to warlordism, peace and order, and campaign regulation compliance. These institutional interventions play a crucial role in fostering peaceful elections, especially in historically volatile areas. Nonetheless, the persistent low observance of candidates following elder directives raises important questions about the changing role of traditional authority in CAR's electoral processes. Further research is needed to understand this evolving dynamic and its implications for democratic governance. The call for martial law in Abra also highlights the delicate balance between ensuring security of the locality and protecting democratic rights of the people.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the potential influence of social desirability bias in these findings. Respondents may have overreported positive behaviors to align with perceived social expectations. Qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, could provide a more nuanced understanding of the actual practices and experiences of voters and candidates.

Extent of performance of the COMELEC. Respondents across the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) generally perceive a high level of performance among local government election personnel, workers, electoral candidates, and voters throughout the election period. Their effectiveness was noted during pre-election, election-day, and post-election activities, with information campaigns on the Omnibus Election Code and voter registration drives rated as the most successful. These pre-election efforts highlight a strong focus on voter education and encouraging participation amongst voters of the locality.

However, the function of "exhorting all registered voters to cast their votes" received the lowest rating, suggesting moderate performance and possible challenges in voter mobilization. An anonymous respondent linked this to voter apprehension about potential violence and perceived insecurity at polling stations, reflecting the concept of perceived risk, where fear of negative outcomes influences behavior.

Table 3

Mean distribution on the extent of performance of Local Comelec

Functions of Local Comelec	Abra/VI	Kalinga/VI	Mt. Province/VI	AM/VI
Before Election Day				
1. Undertake an information campaign on salient features of this Code and help in the dissemination of the orders, decisions and resolutions of the Commission relative to the forthcoming election.	4.02 HP	4.10 HP	3.90 HP	4.01 HP
2. Wage a registration drive in their respective areas so that all citizens of voting age, not otherwise disqualified by law may be registered.	4.06 HP	4.13 HP	3.96 HP	4.05 HP
3. Help cleanse the list of voters of illegal registrants, conduct house-to-house canvass if necessary, and take the appropriate legal steps towards this end.	3.80 HP	3.85 HP	3.85 HP	3.83 HP
4. Report to the Commission violations of the provisions of this Code on the conduct of the political campaign, election propaganda and electoral expenditures.	3.71 HP	3.80 HP	3.68 HP	3.73 HP
During Election Day				
1. Exhort all registered voters in their respective areas to go to their polling places and cast their votes.	3.28 MP	3.31 MP	3.27 MP	3.29 MP
2. Nominate one watcher for accreditation in each polling place and each place of canvass who shall have the same duties, functions and rights as the other watchers of political parties and candidates. Members or units of any citizen group or organization so designated by the Commission except its lone duly accredited watcher, shall not be allowed to enter any polling place except to vote, and shall, if they so desire, stay in an area at least fifty meters away from the polling place.	3.62 HP	3.63 HP	3.64 HP	3.63 HP
3. Report to the peace authorities and other appropriate agencies all instances of terrorism, intimidation of voters, and other similar attempts to frustrate the free and orderly casting of votes.	3.81 HP	3.80 HP	3.84 HP	3.82 HP
4. Perform such other functions as may be entrusted to such group or organization by the Commission.	3.64 HP	3.62 HP	3.76 HP	3.67 HP
After Election Day				
1. When the composition or proceedings of the board of canvassers are contested, the board of canvassers shall, within twenty-four hours, make a ruling thereon with notice to the contestant who, if adversely affected, may appeal the matter to the Commission within five days after the ruling with proper notice to the board of canvassers. After due notice and hearing, the Commission shall decide the case within ten days from the filing thereof. During the pendency of the case, the board of canvassers shall suspend the canvass until the Commission orders the continuation or resumption thereof and citing their reasons or grounds therefor.	3.63 HP	3.61 HP	3.72 HP	3.65 HP
2. All pre-proclamation controversies shall be heard summarily by the Commission after due notice and hearing, and its decisions shall be executory after the lapse of five days from receipt by the losing party of the decision of the Commission, unless restrained by the Supreme Court.	3.53 HP	3.55 HP	3.60 HP	3.56 HP
3. All pre-proclamation controversies shall be heard summarily by the Commission after due notice and hearing, and its decisions shall be executory after the lapse of five days from receipt by the losing party of the decision of the Commission, unless restrained by the Supreme Court.	3.69 HP	3.71 HP	3.68 HP	3.69 HP
Average Mean	**3.71 HP**	**3.74 HP**	**3.72 HP**	**3.72 HP**

High ratings for voter registration drives in Abra, Kalinga, and Mountain Province demonstrate effective collaboration among COMELEC officials, candidates, and voters. This reflects the idea of collective efficacy, where shared belief in achieving common goals boosts group performance. Yet, the moderate ratings for voter mobilization across these provinces reveal a gap between registration and actual turnout, possibly due to voter apathy or distrust in the electoral system. In Ifugao, Dr. Allen Nginlangil attributed peaceful elections to strict adherence to election laws and a performance-based electoral culture, emphasizing accountability and transparency. This aligns with the concept of civic virtue, where voters prefer ethical leadership and hold candidates to high standards.

While perceptions are generally positive, limitations such as social desirability bias may inflate reported performance. Further qualitative research is needed to understand real challenges. Additionally, information asymmetry—voters lacking reliable information on candidates and processes—may contribute to disengagement, underscoring the need to improve media literacy and access to accurate information. Respondents also stressed the importance of strict enforcement of electoral rules by COMELEC officials, highlighting procedural justice's role in maintaining public trust. Atty. Cariño recommended rotating COMELEC and police personnel to prevent undue local affiliations and conflicts of interest, a strategy to combat elite capture and ensure impartiality. This emphasizes the need for checks and balances to safeguard electoral integrity.

Extent of seriousness of problems encountered during election period. This study further went to look into the level of seriousness of the problems usually encountered during election period. Generally, the result of the study shows that the problems are moderately serious having the mean of 2.74 as can be seen on Table 10. Nonregistration of proposed voters on the scheduled registration period by the COMELEC and vote buying have the highest mean of seriousness of problem encountered during

election period. Kidnapping the opposition's voter has the lowest mean of seriousness as a problem, leveled to be slightly serious.

Table 4
Mean distribution on the extent of seriousness of election problems

Problems	Abra	Kalinga	Mt. Province	All Provinces
BEFORE ELECTION				
Nonregistration of proposed voters on the scheduled registration period by the COMELEC	3.36 M.S	3.39 M.S	3.19 M.S	3.31 M.S
Nuisance electoral candidates	3.12 M.S	3.11 M.S	3.16 M.S	3.13 M.S
Killings related to election	2.24 S.S	2.23 S.S	2.37 S.S	2.28 S.S
Damage to property/ies of the electoral candidates	2.13 S.S	2.13 S.S	2.24 S.S	2.17 S.S
Non –compliance by the electoral candidates and supporters on the rules and regulations on proper campaign materials, posting area and period of campaign	3.03 M.S	3.06 M.S	3.05 M.S	3.05 M.S
Threats to supporters and electoral candidates	2.92 M.S	2.89 M.S	2.97 M.S	2.93 M.S
Vote buying	3.36 M.S	3.39 M.S	3.19 M.S	3.31 M.S
DURING ELECTION				
Harassment to board of canvassers	3.16 M.S	3.08 M.S	3.07 M.S	3.10 M.S
Harassment to voters	2.72 M.S	2.70 M.S	2.54 S.S	2.65 S.S
Kidnapping the opposition voter	2.03 S.S	2.05 S.S	1.99 S.S	2.02 S.S
Bringing fire arms at the polling place	2.34 S.S	2.39 S.S	2.36 S.S	2.36 S.S
AFTER ELECTION				
Election protest	3.11 M.S	3.07 M.S	3.19 M.S	3.12 M.S
Stealing of ballot boxes	2.85 M.S	2.83 M.S	2.93 M.S	2.87 M.S
Destroying the ballot boxes	2.28 S.S	2.25 S.S	2.29 S.S	2.27 S.S
Falsification of election results	2.65 M.S	2.63 M.S	2.63 M.S	2.64 M.S
OVERALL MEAN	2.74 M.S	2.73 M.S	2.74 M.S	2.74 M.S

Respondents from the province of Abra, Kalinga, and Mt. Province perceived problem on non-registration of proposed voters on the scheduled registration period by the COMELEC to be moderately serious, gaining the highest mean among the problems. During the election day, harassment to election canvassers was perceived by the respondents to have the highest mean seriousness of problem. After election, the problem on election protest has the highest mean.

For the province of Mt. Province, aside from the non-registration of voter, vote buying was perceived by the respondents from this province as one of the problems having the highest mean as well. That is why, respondents-informants, during the collection of data, said that there should be no vote buying. They added that the voters should not be deceived by false information during election and they should vote wisely. All the respondents from these three provinces perceived the problem on kidnapping the opposition's voter to be least serious among the problems encountered during after election.

Extent of actions taken by the COMELEC on election problems. The study examined the extent of government action through the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) in addressing electoral problems. Overall, respondents perceived the government's response as moderate, with an average rating of 2.66. Among issues before election day, voter non-registration during the scheduled COMELEC registration period was seen as the most addressed problem, with a mean score of 3.04 across Abra, Kalinga, and Mountain Province. Conversely, threats against supporters and candidates received the least government attention, scoring 2.28.

During election day, harassment of voters was perceived as the problem most acted upon, with a mean of 2.80, while the presence of firearms at polling precincts received the least action, rated 2.36. Post-election, election protests garnered the highest perceived government response (mean of 2.92), whereas destruction of ballots was seen as least addressed (mean of 2.50).

Respondents from Abra and Kalinga noted moderate government action on voter registration issues but highlighted insufficient attention to threats against candidates and supporters, signaling gaps in electoral security. Open-ended feedback pointed to concerns about internal COMELEC corruption, political inequality, and persistent vote-buying practices, such as candidates offering material inducements. Calls for stricter enforcement of firearm regulations and rejection of vote-buying underscored the importance of rule of law and ethical voting.

In Mountain Province, voter non-registration and nuisance candidates were perceived as well-addressed, but enforcement of campaign material regulations was seen as inconsistent, possibly due to limited resources or political will. This uneven government response suggests the need for a more comprehensive strategy that prioritizes neglected issues like threats and regulatory compliance.

Addressing electoral challenges requires tackling underlying socio-political factors such as corruption, clientelism, and firearm proliferation through coordinated efforts involving law enforcement, community leaders, and civil society. Civic education is crucial to foster ethical voting and empower informed participation. Finally, regional differences highlight the importance of tailoring interventions to the unique contexts of each province.

Conclusions. In the light of the findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. *High Awareness and Observance of Electoral Principles.* Respondents across the Cordillera Administrative Region demonstrate a strong understanding and practice of key principles that promote peaceful and diplomatic electoral processes, particularly in voter education and respect for electoral candidates.

2. *Challenges in Voter Mobilization and Respect for Voter Choice.* Despite high awareness, there are moderate levels of voter mobilization and respect for voter choice, indicating gaps between knowledge and actual electoral behavior, which may contribute to electoral tensions or lower voter turnout.

3. *Evolving Role of Traditional Authority.* The consistent low observance of candidates adhering to elder directives suggests a shifting dynamic in the influence of traditional governance structures within the electoral process, highlighting a generational and cultural transition in political participation.

Recommendations. From the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are hereby given:

1. *Strengthen Voter Mobilization Efforts.* COMELEC and local stakeholders should develop targeted campaigns to encourage voter turnout and reinforce the importance of respecting voter choices, addressing fears related to election security and promoting inclusive participation.

2. *Integrate Traditional and Formal Governance.* Encourage dialogue and collaboration between indigenous leaders and formal electoral bodies to harmonize traditional conflict resolution mechanisms with modern electoral practices, fostering social cohesion and reducing electoral violence.

3. *Enhance Training and Rotation of Election Personnel.* Implement regular training and rotation of COMELEC and police personnel to maintain impartiality, prevent local biases, and uphold the integrity of the electoral process, thereby increasing public trust and minimizing elite capture.

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