

An Exploratory Study of the Effectiveness of Unconditional Educational Assistance Program as a Programmatic Electoral Strategy in the Philippines: The Case of Makati City's Project FREE

MIGUEL ENRICO GUTIERREZ AYSON¹, ESTHER MARYLERMA CALVO²

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study deviated from the influential theoretical lens of clientelism in examining voter-politician ties in Philippine political studies. Drawing on Kitschelt and Wilkinson's (2007) conceptualization of programmatic politics as an alternative electoral strategy, we investigated how a programmatic linkage between a local political leader and its electoral constituency is facilitated through the non-contingent and regular distribution of school materials for public school children. This local programmatic policy has gained popularity among various local government units (LGUs) in the Philippines. We focused on the Makati City government's Project FREE (Free Relevant and Excellent Education) due to its reputation for arguably being the most innovative and comprehensive educational assistance program ever implemented at the country's local scale. We employed a purposive sampling technique to obtain our participants – the project's parent beneficiaries. Through in-depth interviews, we investigated the attitudes and perceptions of Project FREE's parent beneficiaries towards the mayor's programmatic commitment to them. By using thematic analysis, five themes emerged from the interview data: (1) financial relief, (2) educational security, (3) unique source of local citizen satisfaction, (4) personally dispensed patronage of a benefactor politician, and (5) invaluable benefits and project continuity: influencing vote preference. Beyond the particularistic and contingent exchanges prevalent in the Philippine local political setting, this study's findings also offer in-depth explanations for what motivates voters to reciprocate their local political leader with electoral support for its education-based programmatic inducements.

Keywords: Educational Assistance, Philippines, Programmatic Politics, Makati.

ABSTRAK

Studi eksplorasi ini menyimpang dari lensa teoretis klientelisme yang berpengaruh dalam mengkaji hubungan pemilih-politikus dalam studi politik Filipina. Menggambar pada konseptualisasi Kitschelt dan Wilkinson (2007)

AFFILIATION:
¹Department of Social Sciences,
University of the Philippines Los
Baños
²Department of Political Sciences,
Lund University, Sweden

CORRESPONDENCE:
mgayson@up.edu.ph

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tentang politik terprogram sebagai strategi pemilihan alternatif, kami menyelidiki bagaimana hubungan programatik antara pemimpin politik lokal dan konstituen pemilihannya difasilitasi melalui distribusi materi sekolah non-kontingen dan reguler untuk anak-anak sekolah umum. Kebijakan program lokal ini telah mendapatkan popularitas di antara berbagai unit pemerintah daerah (LGU) di Filipina. Kami fokus pada Proyek Pemerintah Kota Makati GRATIS (Gratis Relevan dan Pendidikan Luar Biasa) karena reputasinya sebagai program bantuan pendidikan paling inovatif dan komprehensif yang pernah dilaksanakan di skala lokal negara itu. Kami menggunakan teknik purposive sampling untuk mendapatkan peserta kami – orang tua penerima manfaat proyek. Melalui wawancara mendalam, kami menyelidiki sikap dan persepsi orang tua penerima manfaat Project FREE terhadap komitmen program walikota kepada mereka. Dengan menggunakan analisis tematik, lima tema muncul dari data wawancara: (1) bantuan keuangan, (2) keamanan pendidikan, (3) sumber kepuasan warga lokal yang unik, (4) dukungan pribadi dari politisi dermawan, dan (5) manfaat tak ternilai dan kelangsungan proyek: mempengaruhi preferensi suara. Di luar pertukaran patronase partikularistik dan berbasis kontingensi yang lazim di lingkungan politik lokal Filipina, temuan penelitian ini juga menawarkan penjelasan mendalam tentang apa yang memotivasi pemilih untuk membalas pemimpin politik lokal mereka dengan dukungan elektoral untuk bujukan terprogram berbasis pendidikannya.

Kata Kunci: Bantuan Pendidikan; Filipina; Politik Terprogram; Makati

INTRODUCTION

Clientelism is a phenomenon common across different countries that shape voter-politician relationships. Its traditional view emerged from the notion of reciprocal exchange of goods and services between actors of unequal power and socioeconomic status (Clapham, 1982; Scott, 1972). In an attempt to add conceptual clarity to a concept whose meaning and application vary across academic domains, several scholars of comparative political studies have situated clientelism within the realm of electoral politics (Hicken, 2011; Kitschelt, 2000; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Roniger, 2004; Stokes, 2011). For example, Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007, p. 2) characterized clientelism as “the direct exchange of a citizen’s vote in return for direct payments or continuing access to employment, goods, and services.” On the other hand, Stokes (2011, p. 649) offered a relatively straightforward definition of clientelism as “the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support.”

In the Philippine political context, clientelism is a pervasive practice that most candidates rely on particularistic and contin-

gency-based exchanges for their electoral success ([Hicken, Aspinall, et al., 2019](#)). During elections, it has become a widespread practice among candidates to distribute material rewards to their constituents for electoral support ([Kasuya, 2009](#); [Schaffer, 2007](#)). Furthermore, because existing election rules in the Philippines permit incumbents to seek re-election in virtually all political positions, access to state resources has become an important mechanism to maintain clientelistic ties, thereby perpetuating themselves and their respective clans in power ([Querubin, 2016](#); [Teehankee, 2012](#)). Due to the persistence of these practices, clientelism has become an influential theoretical framework in examining the country's electoral and party dynamics ([Kimura, 2018](#)).

However, one topic in Philippine political studies that needs further exploration is the voters' programmatic linkages to politicians. It is a mode of electoral exchange that sharply contrasts with clientelism. While in clientelism, politicians supply benefits to individuals they rely on for electoral support, the distributional strategy of programmatic politics does not engage in such a contingent exchange ([Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007](#)). Instead, politicians rely on the unconditional provision of public policies to gain electoral support.

Paradoxically, the non-contingent and indirect exchange mechanism of programmatic politics has been widely practiced in the Philippines, especially at the local level. A notable example is the several local government units' (LGUs) provision of non-transferable privileges to senior citizens and persons with disabilities (PWDs), such as free movie access, maintenance medicines, grocery items, and annual cash incentives irrespective of their political preferences. Moreover, these benefits are distributed to intended beneficiaries outside election campaigns. Amidst the backdrop of patronage-driven and personality-oriented politics, combined with the widespread practice of credit claiming among Filipino politicians ([Kasuya, 2009](#); [Weiss, 2019](#)), beneficiaries are also likely to give particularistic recognition to incum-

bents for such material assistance. As a result, a lasting voter-politician linkage may develop through a sense of gratitude or indebtedness, without the latter resorting to the clientelistic instruments of targeted distribution and vote monitoring. Neither is such a linkage primarily formed around a local political machinery “built from a combination of clientelist (including familial) ties and short-term instrumentalist arrangements” ([Hicken, Hutchcroft, et al., 2019, p. 10](#))

In this exploratory study, we investigate how a programmatic linkage between a local political leader and its electoral constituency is facilitated through the institutionalized distribution of school materials for public school children. This local programmatic policy has gained popularity among various LGUs in the Philippines. Our focus is the Makati City government’s comprehensive educational assistance program, formally known as Project FREE (Free Relevant and Excellent Education). This initiative of the country’s richest LGU established the annual delivery of school materials and benefits to all students enrolled in Makati public schools.

We provide two interrelated reasons for focusing on a programmatic policy related to education and selecting Makati City as our research locale. First, one of the most pervasive obstacles to sending children to schools Filipino households face is poverty ([David & Albert, 2012](#)). Although the 1987 Constitution mandates the government to establish a system of free public education in the Philippines, parents must still spend on the school supplies, uniforms, meals and daily allowances, and transportation of their children. Therefore, politicians’ pledges of educational assistance could indicate the delivery of long-term and high-value goods to the household beneficiaries, as opposed to the low-value payoffs made through clientelistic exchanges during an election cycle. Second, while providing school materials and benefits is a common government program, Project FREE is the Philippines’ first and most comprehensive local educational assistance initiative of its kind, making it an intriguing subject

for inquiry. Moreover, Makati City outspends other LGUs in basic education spending per student ([Mendoza & Altavas, 2015](#)). The incumbent mayor's governance agenda also drives this priority to invest in the education sector ([Zurbano, 2019b](#)).

This study intends to contribute to the body of literature on programmatic politics in two ways. First, while extant literature in this research area is mainly party-centric ([Bulut, 2020](#); [Calvo & Murillo, 2012](#); [Gebru, 2014](#); [Kitschelt, 2012](#); [Lucas, 2015](#)), we focused on the voter-politician programmatic ties. In this deviation, we considered the candidate-centric nature of Philippine elections. Since electoral competition in the country is personality- rather than party-driven ([Hutchcroft & Rocamora, 2003](#); [Teehankee, 2012](#)), politicians could also exploit programmatic linkages to succeed or complement their clientelistic linkage strategies in pursuit of votes.

Second, while some studies on programmatic politics are also politician-centered, focusing on the candidates' use of programmatic strategies for electoral advantage ([Harjanto, 2019](#); [Mas'Udi & Kurniawan, 2017](#)), we concentrated on the voters as they engage in a programmatic exchange with their incumbent. Through in-depth interviews, our research objective is to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of Project FREE's parent beneficiaries towards the incumbent's programmatic commitment to them. Therefore, this study's findings also provide in-depth explanations of what stimulates voters to reciprocate the incumbent with electoral support for its education-based programmatic inducements, transpiring beyond the particularistic and contingency-based patronage exchange prevalent in the Philippine local political setting. This study is structured as follows. The next section contextualizes Project FREE as a local programmatic policy. Following a discussion of the study's methodology, the findings are presented. The last section concludes with a discussion of the findings as well as the study's limitations.

MAKATI CITY'S PROJECT FREE AS A LOCAL PROGRAM-MATIC POLICY

Project FREE was launched in 1995 as one of Jejomar C. Binay's social welfare programs as the long-time mayor of Makati City¹ ([Zurbano, 2019a](#)). Its goal is to help parents of Makati public school students by significantly lowering their annual educational expenses. These students are eligible to receive a standard package of school supplies (e.g., notebooks, pens, and writing pads), bags, and uniforms (school and physical education), among others, from the city government regardless of their residence.² Its implementation covers all thirty-eight (38) public elementary and secondary schools in Makati City, including enrollees of SPED and Alternative Learning System (ALS).

The distribution of school materials is one of the pioneer initiatives of the first Binay administration that incumbent Mayor Abigail "Abby" Binay-Campos vowed to continue and expand when she vied for the city's mayoralty position in 2016³. Promising to restore what their political clan dubbed as "*Serbisyong Binay*" (Binay Service) to the city that was then governed by their rival⁴, her campaign focused on making policy pledges to Makati voters, primarily by evoking her father's pro-poor programs. This campaign tactic is crucial in programmatic politics, in which politicians emphasize policies and programs, and their track record of pursuing them ([Molleda et al., 2014, p. 114](#)). In Binay-Campos' two successive campaigns (2016 and 2019), she pledged to make education a top policy priority of her administration.

The incumbent's commitment to prioritizing education is seen in her administration's drastic increase in the funds allotted to Project FREE. For example, in the city government's 2020 budget, crafted in the same year she won her second term in 2019, a staggering 1.16 billion pesos was allotted only for its implementation ([Santos, 2020](#)). Moreover, she expanded the project by including other materials such as black leather shoes, rubber shoes (dubbed by netizens as "Air Binay" after it trended on social media), raincoats, rain boots, anti-dengue kits, and hygiene kits.

The city government distributes these materials in tranches during specified distribution periods within the school year.

Aside from the expansion of Project FREE, these materials underwent some evident cosmetic changes during Binay-Campos' term. Notably, the city government has begun using a color combination of white and sky blue in almost all materials supplied to Makati public school students, including their P.E. uniforms. Such a combination strongly evoked the mayor's political brand since her "Team Performance" slate used the same motif during the Makati local elections. The incumbent's caricature is also prominently displayed on the student notebooks and intermediate pads. It also appears in public relations materials and official city government social media pages during her term. This indicates an active promotion of the incumbent's image, specifically by infusing her political brand with the project delivery.

The distribution of school materials under Project FREE is a clear example of a club goods allocation strategy to cultivate programmatic ties between the incumbent and her constituents. While club goods may also be supplied through a clientelistic exchange, their programmatic allocation occurs within the "highly specific stipulations for policy implementation which both the administrators of the policies and recipients of the benefits have to abide regardless of their personal political preferences" ([Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007, p. 11](#)). As a result, politicians who pursue programmatic linkage strategies can only rely on the distributive impact of such policies to secure electoral support. Similarly, as in the case of Project FREE, the incumbent facilitating its implementation is technically barred from sanctioning parent beneficiaries who did not reciprocate with electoral support. In this trade-off situation, the specific constituency service she delivers may or may not guarantee their votes in her favor. Our study's findings also demonstrated how either outcome could occur.

METHODS PARTICIPANTS

This study employed a purposive sampling technique in selecting the participants. In this technique, participants are typically chosen based on prescribed criteria such as socio-demographic characteristics, specific experiences, roles, or behaviors ([Ritchie et al., 2003](#)). Considering our research objective, we set the following criteria for selecting our participants: (1) a resident and registered voter of Makati City, and (2) has a child enrolled in either of the two most populous elementary schools in the city's two legislative districts – Pio Del Pilar and Pembo Elementary Schools (ES). The second criterion was mainly set in consideration of our research funding and timetable.

The total sample size for this study was twenty (20), with ten (10) from each school mentioned above. Gall et al. (2003, p. 181) assert that “in qualitative research, determining sample size is entirely a matter of judgement; there are no set rules.” Instead, a case-to-case basis is observed depending on the researcher's goal ([Fowler, 2014](#)). Nevertheless, our sample size exceeds the range of 6 to 12, where saturation may occur, as suggested by Guest et al. (2006). In our experience, our semi-structured interview procedure and the homogenous composition of our participants based on our criteria enabled us to grasp how parent beneficiaries perceive Project FREE and how it facilitates a programmatic linkage between them and their political leader. Such an experience is consistent with Green and Thorogood's (2004, pp. 103–104) observation that “the experience of most qualitative researchers is that in interview studies little that is ‘new’ comes out of transcripts after you have interviewed 20 or so people.” We reached this saturation point when we observed that the participants' answers to our questions were often repetitions, elaborations, or minor alterations of the other responses.

To identify the potential participants, we requested an endorsement from the central office of the Department of Education (DepEd) and the office of the Schools Division Superintendent

– DepEd-Makati. A summary of our research proposal was also forwarded to these offices for their reference. After securing their formal endorsements, we scheduled separate meetings with Pio Del Pilar ES and Pembo ES principals to orient them about our research goals and data collection procedure. Upon their respective instructions, the school property custodian of Pio Del Pilar ES and the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) president of Pembo ES assisted us in identifying the parent beneficiaries who would satisfy the criteria mentioned above.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of our participants. All our participants were female and long-time Makati residents between

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Year of Birth	Place of Birth (Province or City)	Employment Status	Marital Status
1	F	1969	Makati City	Self-Employed	Married
2	F	--	Cagayan	Self-Employed	Married
3	F	1981	Bicol Region	Full-time	Married
4	F	1979	Palawan	Unemployed	Married
5	F	1992	Leyte	Unemployed	Married
6	F	1979	Northern Samar	Unemployed	Married
7	F	1970	Pasay City	Part-time	Married
8	F	1979	Samar	Unemployed	Married
9	F	1976	Iloilo	Unemployed	Married
10	F	1992	Negros Occidental	Unemployed	Married
11	F	1979	Makati City	Part-time	Married
12	F	1980	Occidental Mindoro	Unemployed	Married
13	F	1977	Cagayan Valley	Unemployed	Married
14	F	1979	Ifugao	Unemployed	Married
15	F	1971	Bulacan	Self-employed	Married
16	F	1987	Makati City	Unemployed	Single, but living with a partner
17	F	1992	Makati City	Unemployed	Married
18	F	1976	Pangasinan	Self-employed	Single, but living with a partner
19	F	1983	Oriental Mindoro	Self-employed	Separated
20	F	1984	Catanduanes	Self-employed	Married

the ages of late twenties to early fifties. Most are housewives, while others are fully employed, have part-time jobs, or are self-employed. Such an overrepresentation of the same gender and occupation among our participants occurred primarily because our interviews were conducted during school hours when the parents who were most available to participate in our study are unemployed and are awaiting class dismissal to fetch their children. It also reflects the constant trend of low labor force participation of Filipino women ([New NEDA Study, 2019](#)).

DATA COLLECTION

This study adopted in-depth semi-structured interviews as our primary data collection procedure. Consistent with our research objectives, we designed an interview guide to gather the following information from our participants: (1) the kinds and quantity of material benefits received by their children under Project FREE and the procedure of distribution, (2) the benefits brought about by the project to their respective families, (3) their perspectives of the city government's objectives in offering these benefits, and (4) whether these benefits have become the primary consideration of their voting choice for the local chief executive in Makati City, among others. This interview guide structured the flow of questions asked to each participant, thereby allowing us to efficiently compare their responses during the coding and theme-identification phase of the thematic analysis.

All interviews were accomplished at Pio Del Pilar ES and Pembo ES on different schedules. Through the assistance of the various school personnel enumerated above, each participant was pre-informed about the schedule and venue where their respective interviews would be conducted.

DATA ANALYSIS

This study's data analysis procedure followed the systematic phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012). At the preliminary stage, immersion and familiarization of the

data were achieved through careful listening to interview recordings, transcribing, and repeated readings of the interview transcripts. Initial observations and documentation of important points or patterns from the data were also performed during this stage. After achieving considerable familiarity with the data, we generated preliminary descriptive codes by grouping meaningful and parallel interview extracts. These codes were later refined and assigned under specific themes that were developed using an inductive approach. This process involves the identification of vivid and illustrative examples of excerpts that capture and represent the essence of each theme ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). After a thorough review of the data, five (5) themes were identified.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study followed the ethical considerations in conducting social research enumerated by Willig (2008): (1) informed consent, (2) no deception, (3) right to withdrawal, (3) debriefing, and (5) confidentiality. Participants were informed that their responses would be recorded for documentation and transcribing purposes. Copies of their respective interview transcripts were sent through the school property custodian of Pio Del Pilar ES and the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) president of Pembo ES. No participant was compelled to take part in this study. Furthermore, there is no conflict of interest on the part of the researchers, and all data acquired for this study were analyzed objectively.

FINDINGS

By using thematic analysis, five (5) themes emerged from the interview data regarding our participants' attitudes and perceptions towards Project FREE: (1) financial relief, (2) educational security, (3) unique source of local citizen satisfaction, (4) personally dispensed patronage of a benefactor politician, and (5) invaluable benefits and project continuity: influencing vote preference.

FINANCIAL RELIEF

One of the main themes that emerged from our interviews is the unparalleled financial relief Project FREE brings to our participants. They all shared how they saved money and allocated a significant portion of their education budget to other family necessities. Based on their narratives, we discovered that their respective household incomes barely cover their families' basic needs. One participant who sells dry and wet goods for a living described the financial hardships parents face nowadays to send their children to school. She added that even a PHP 500 allowance (USD 10), almost the same amount as the minimum daily wage in the National Capital Region (NCR), is no longer sufficient to meet her family's basic needs, especially in sustaining the education of her two children.

Correspondingly, we found that Project FREE not only satisfies their children's schooling needs but also enables them to ensure that their other family necessities are covered due to the savings they accumulated as project beneficiaries. This is the primary reason why, when asked to describe how the project benefits their respective families, our participants concentrate instantaneously on the financial relief it provides.

P6: It helps a lot because, for example, just providing them with uniforms already lightens our expenses. As parents, we do not have to buy using our budget. Given that all 3 of my children attend school, it puts a significant financial burden on me to purchase [school supplies] prior to the opening of classes. Since I no longer need to purchase, the money is used for other purposes.

P15: It gives us relief because they [school supplies] cost a lot. For example, if they cost around 3,000 pesos, it leaves a sizeable saving for me.

P16: It helps not just the poor but also the well-to-do parents. You need not bother about purchasing school shoes and uniforms, as a couple of sets were provided. You don't have to purchase notebooks. Everything is provided. Except for school bags, you have no other expenses to worry about. It helps the parents in saving money.

Since almost all the material needs of students are provided regularly, our participants disclosed that the only costs they incur for their children's education are food and transportation allowances.

P9: Everything is free. Our only concern is taking and fetching them from school.

P11: It helps because we don't have to buy uniforms and notebooks. It lessens our expenses for school supplies. Instead of buying these materials, we will only use our budget for their daily allowances, transportation expenses, and food. It helps a lot.

P13: Buying school supplies entails significant costs. Consider my situation, as I am currently unemployed. While my husband is employed, he saves for our household needs. It [Project FREE] significantly reduces our expenses. We only worry about their food allowances and transportation costs to and from school.

P18: Instead of buying school supplies, we only allot money for their food. So, it [Project FREE] helps a lot. We can save money.

The entire daily cost of these allowances, however, is not likely to exceed PHP 100 (USD 2.00) per student. This is mainly because their elementary-aged children spend just half a day in school, and they reside in barangays (villages) where Pio Del Pilar ES and Pembo ES are located. Furthermore, the cost might be reduced if their children are enlisted in the school's feeding program, as some participants already shared enthusiasm towards the city government's plan to include the distribution of nutritious meals under Project FREE.

EDUCATIONAL SECURITY

A child's access to formal education mainly depends on their parents' employment and financial stability. Despite the constitutional mandate that public school education at the primary and secondary levels must be offered free, the parents' inability to pay for the "hidden costs" of schooling could cause their child to stop attending school ([Gloria, 1997](#)). These include the ex-

penses for school supplies, school uniforms, and daily allowances. However, since Project FREE guarantees the continuous delivery of materials needed by Makati public school students, it significantly reduces the dependence of their access to formal education on their parents' financial capabilities. As a result, despite the parents' unemployment or lack of a steady or sufficient source of income, their children still enjoy a certain level of educational security necessary to sustain their attendance in school.

P14: The advantage of these benefits among parents is that we no longer have to say to our children, "you won't go to school because you don't have a uniform, you don't have shoes" ...That's the usual problem faced by students. Now, they don't have any excuses but to study.

P19: My God, life is difficult these days. You know, your PHP 500 bill is like a coin that will get you nowhere. Nothing. Today, rice is very expensive. So, it [PROJECT FREE] is really beneficial since it's difficult even to contemplate buying school supplies under such hardships. That's why without these benefits, many students won't be able to attend school and study.

P20: It helps a lot because my husband only earns a daily minimum wage which is just sufficient to pay for our monthly housing rent. The benefits provided to us mean a lot, especially the school supplies, because we no longer have to buy them. In the provinces, you even have to buy pencils. Here [in Makati], you have no problem. All you must do is study.

As shown in Table 1, most of our participants are either unemployed or have part-time jobs. Their spouses mostly have low-paying, seasonal, or non-tenure jobs, such as jeepney and sidecar drivers, construction workers, factory workers, and restaurant crews. Thus, their overall incomes barely cover their family necessities. Nevertheless, given that Project FREE covers all Makati public school students, it was evident from their accounts that they are relieved of the anxiety of being unable to send their children to school due to their meager incomes and unstable

employment. As one participant explained, “since we are residing in Makati City, we know that we are supported.”

UNIQUE SOURCE OF LOCAL CITIZEN SATISFACTION

Beyond the financial relief and the educational security Project Free brings, its comprehensive benefits package also evokes a distinct sense of satisfaction among its beneficiaries. Most participants were eager to compare their experiences as Makati residents with those from other parts of the country. One of them revealed that she relocated permanently from Tuguegarao City, a 3rd class city in the northern Philippines, mainly because of the benefits Makati residents are entitled to.

P2: Everything is provided from head to toe. That’s what is beautiful here in Makati, the benefits. In Tuguegarao, I must buy everything. That’s why I transferred my vote here in Makati.

Such an experience is not entirely uncommon, as another participant witnessed a similar occurrence among the residents of Makati’s neighboring city. She revealed that “even parents from Pasay [City] enroll their children in our public schools because they see the perks of being a Makati public school student.”

During interviews, our participants shared their awareness of the unique and premium benefits they enjoy as Makati residents. One of them, who frequently visits her relatives in San Pedro, Laguna, a city just outside NCR, described her fifth-grade daughter’s distinct privilege over her cousins.

P3: Upon seeing the school bag and shoes my daughter received, one of her cousins asked why she was not receiving the same school items from their city government [San Pedro, Laguna].

In addition to obtaining sufficient school materials that are not even provided in other LGUs, our participants also felt privileged to have received additional products under Project FREE on a regular basis.

P12: With God’s help, benefits are provided annually. During the opening of the school year, uniforms are already there. Now, we also

receive socks. It's complete. Uniform, skirt, socks, and leather shoes. PE uniforms are also supplied, such as a t-shirt, jogging pants, and rubber shoes. They even provide anti-dengue kits!

As previously mentioned, Project FREE also includes the distribution of raincoats and boots, emergency kits, and hygiene kits to Makati public school students. During the holiday season, they also receive grocery items containing oatmeal, cereals, biscuits, and powdered chocolate drinks. These are different from grocery items given to their households by the city government during the said period. Despite being financially stable, one participant still expressed gratitude for the items her daughter receives through Project FREE. She said, “this is truly convenient for a parent like me because you know how children are: they wish their parents to buy them whatever they want.” Furthermore, for several participants, since the materials were generous in quantity and replenished annually, they could send some excesses to their relatives in the provinces. For example, one participant was able to send her children’s outgrown uniforms and shoes to her relatives in Northern Samar province.

For those participants who previously attended public schools in Makati City, the sense of satisfaction also arises from witnessing the drastic expansion of Project FREE benefits over the years. To highlight how fortunate and privileged their children are nowadays, they recalled a time when the distribution of school materials in the city was neither implemented nor abundant in quantity. For example, one participant attended a Makati public school when Nemesio I. Yabut was mayor (1972 – 1986). She could not keep comparing her experience to that of her children.

Similarly, two other participants were born and raised in Barangay Pembo and attended primary public school when Jejomar Binay was just the newly elected mayor.⁵ They recalled receiving only notebooks and having to sew their school uniforms from the fabric provided by the city government at the start of each school year. Currently, ready-made school uniforms

and shoes are distributed based on the student's size requirements.

PERSONALLY DISPENSED PATRONAGE OF A BENEFAC- TOR POLITICIAN

Our participants' view toward the incumbent constitutes another theme in this study. Most of them perceive the mayor as their benefactor who provides essential goods and services to their families. As a result, Project FREE materials are primarily viewed as the mayor's personally dispensed patronage, even though these are technically government-supplied benefits. This theme emerged from (1) the participants' spontaneous utterances implying that Project FREE benefits are provided by the mayor rather than as a product of an institutionalized local government program, and (2) expression of direct gratitude to the mayor for the project's benefits to their families.

P2: The mayor provides everything. You don't have to buy ...It's very convenient. Our only concern is the food. That's the only one. But according to the mayor, the children will also receive meals...Last December, she gave them groceries. Then, in March, she would provide another [benefits] to motivate the children to graduate, such as a tumbler.

P4: Free uniform, shoes, school supplies, anti-dengue kit. Then raincoats and rain boots. The mayor provides them...What is given by the mayor means a lot.

P7: Food during Christmas, shoes, clothes, raincoats, etc. Whatever the mayor gives, we were able to receive it...I've never seen my daughter so excited upon receiving a bag. I said, "do well in your studies because the mayor even gave you Christmas gifts."

P20: I always remind my children that the mayor has provided nearly everything they need. They just have to go attend school and learn. What else can they ask for? In the province, they wear slippers to school [due to poverty]. Here, everything is complete...It didn't come from us. It came from the mayor.

Since our participants' responses warranted further probing, we inquired as to why they felt that the mayor deserved their utmost gratitude for the benefits Project FREE brings to their families. Their immediate responses remained consistent with their perception of the mayor as their benefactor. For example, one participant explained that the mayor deserves the sole credit for the project's implementation: "she is the only one who distributes [the school materials]." Correspondingly, two others praised the mayor, whom they credited for conceiving and carrying out the project. However, as previously discussed, Project FREE was launched in 1995 during the Binay patriarch's term and was only sustained by his successors from their clan. In addition, several participants perceived the mayor to be the source of the materials their children receive through Project FREE due to the labels and images found on them. One participant further claimed that some materials bear the mayor's name.

The account mentioned above of the materials' physical appearance is partially consistent with our description in the earlier section of this study. However, contrary to the participant's account, the mayor's name does not appear on the materials. Nevertheless, the student's primary school supplies, such as notebooks and intermediate pads, prominently display her caricature. Together with the materials' color motif, graphic representations associated with the incumbent suggest that the project's implementation is infused with motivations to cultivate a personal reputation and earn credit among constituents to maximize electoral returns. Thus, in explaining her opinion of the motivations of local politicians in the Philippines for delivering free school materials such as Project FREE, one participant casually stated, "they want to be remembered by the voters for handing them out."

INVALUABLE BENEFITS AND PROJECT CONTINUITY: INFLUENCING VOTE PREFERENCE

Another theme that emerged from our interviews offers rel-

evant insights into one of our research objectives: to understand what motivates voters to reciprocate their local political leader with electoral support for its education-based programmatic inducements. Most participants disclosed that Project FREE serves as their principal basis for supporting the incumbent's re-election bid for two interrelated reasons: (1) the project provides invaluable benefits to their households, and (2) they want to ensure that the project is implemented without interruption. Thus, it was evident from their accounts that the electoral support the incumbent gained from them is attributable to their dependence on the project to meet their children's schooling needs, thereby relieving them of a heavy financial burden Filipino parents commonly experience.

For instance, some participants revealed that the project's comprehensive benefits package influences their vote preference because it guarantees their respective families considerable financial relief. This is consistent with their perception of the project's benefit, as discussed in the earlier theme.

P3: For me? My answer is yes [provision of school materials as a factor for choosing their local leader]. Because I would no longer spend using our tight budget, it greatly helps. Imagine if I allocated [budget] for these expenses. It would make things difficult for us, right? So, I see no problem with it... I really admire Mayor Abby for not abandoning us.

P5: It lightens our financial burden. The fact that we no longer have to buy school supplies, since everything is provided for free, is a big help for us...From then on, I pledged to vote for her.

P10: Definitely, it was a factor because it lessens our financial burden in buying their uniforms. It significantly reduces our expenses, especially now that the prices of basic commodities are very high.

For other participants who disclosed that the delivery of school-related materials influences their vote preference in Makati local elections, we found that their consistent electoral support for

the mayor is primarily motivated by their desire to ensure the project's continuity.

P14: Will I vote for her because of these [benefits]? Of course, I will, especially if I know this will continue. We're receiving a lot of benefits here. Even if you deem it as too inconsiderable, at least they're able to provide... here in Pembo, how many students receive free shoes? Socks also! We were given free socks. What else can you ask for? Each student receives 3 pairs of socks.

Correspondingly, some participants' choice to support the incumbent is driven by fear that Project FREE's implementation may be impeded if she is voted out of office.

P2: The first thing I thought of whenever an election comes is when she loses, the free school supplies could be gone as well...if she [mayor] will run again, we will vote for her. For several years, we are receiving these benefits in Makati. Why bother to replace her?

P20: I'm anxious, of course, about the possibility of a newcomer being elected to office who could roll back the accomplishments of the past [administration]. That's worrying because it means that we might spend again [for school supplies].

During interviews, we also encountered some participants who explained that being Project FREE's parent beneficiaries do not automatically mean they will reciprocate the mayor with their vote. This was expected since politicians pursue policy programs and electoral constituencies benefit from them in a programmatic exchange, regardless of the latter's political preferences. Three participants regarded Project FREE as the mayor's responsibility to address the collective needs of her citizens using public funds and not as a form of political leverage in exchange for their vote. Another participant said that qualification and the capacity to deliver quality public service should be the most important criteria for choosing their mayor, regardless of the quantity of material goods it delivers.

P11: I don't feel obligated to vote for them since it's their responsibil-

ity to provide these benefits to our children.

P13: We should not solely select [candidates] based on the material benefits provided. We must vote for those who are truly qualified, regardless of what they provide.

P15: The government earns revenues from our taxes. So probably that's the source of their funding for these kinds of projects. I pay taxes. Hence, I expect these benefits as a taxpayer.

P17: Makati City is the country's business capital. It collects enormous revenues. People had a lot of tax contributions here, that's why they are providing these benefits

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the context of local policy delivery in the Philippines, prioritizing the educational sector through the institutionalized distribution of school-related materials amidst the backdrop of patronage-driven and personality-oriented politics appears to be a clever programmatic strategy. Consistent with the famous adage, “killing two birds with one stone,” Project FREE combines policy characteristics that are genuinely public-regarding on the one hand and politically rewarding on the other hand.

First, education is one of the essential investments local political leaders can make to deliver long-term benefits and opportunities for their electoral constituencies. Education is a basic need, but since the Philippine education system is not universally accessible, many Filipinos are deprived of this opportunity. For example, based on the recent Multidimensional Poverty Index of the Philippine Statistics Authority (2018), Filipino families are most deprived of education, compared with other necessities such as health and nutrition, housing, and employment. The report says that roughly around 5 of 10 families were deprived of access to basic education services.

This is the main reason why our participants regarded Project FREE as a policy that brings invaluable benefits to their respective households, especially given its unparalleled scope. Because it addresses the persistent problem of deprivation and inequality

in the Philippine education sector, there is little doubt that this type of local programmatic policy is an inefficient and wasteful use of public resources, a staple Filipino criticism leveled at government-funded projects. As one of our participants said, many children would be out of school without these benefits.

Second, the regular delivery of school materials to all Makati public school students also provides the incumbent with a seamless opportunity to cultivate a personal reputation. As previously discussed, Project FREE materials underwent drastic aesthetic transformations consistent with the mayor's political brand, a strategy intended to maximize electoral gains. This initiative could plausibly be driven by Makati City's shifting political terrain, caused by the presence of a strong mayoralty contender in 2016 to challenge the Binay clan's dominance in the city's politics, and the intra-family conflict that saw two Binay siblings vie for the mayoralty post in 2019. Based on some of our participants' responses, we found that the incumbent's efforts to personalize and rebrand the project bear substantial political rewards. Moreover, Project FREE's invaluable benefits to their respective households induce several participants to assure its continued implementation by electorally supporting the incumbent.

The programmatic linkages between politicians and voters tend to emerge in better-off countries and welfare systems ([Mas'Udi & Kurniawan, 2017](#)). Clientelistic exchanges may diminish when governments have more resources to spend on the club and public goods. In this regard, it is equally important to highlight Makati City's economic profile as the primary structural enabler for the incumbent to make realistic pledges and deliver policy-based inducements to her constituencies. Therefore, given the scarcity of financial resources faced by various LGUs in the Philippines and their fiscal dependence on the national government, the unconditional provision of comprehensive educational assistance is not a local programmatic strategy available to most local political leaders, specifically at the city and municipal levels.

The main limitations of this study are as follows. First, while this study brings a promising contribution to the scant literature on the voter-politician programmatic ties in Philippine political studies, it concentrated on a single program of the Makati city government. Due to this limitation, we recognize the difficulty in making straightforward causal claims regarding the extent to which the approval and satisfaction with Project FREE contribute to the incumbent's overall electoral success, given the variety of health and social services programs for which Makati City is well-known.

Another limitation of this study is that our participants do not represent the various socioeconomic classes of Makati residents. Based on our interviews and participants' occupational profiles, we inferred that most of them belong to the lower middle class and below. Thus, future studies should be expanded in the sample size, as beneficiaries from various classes may hold diverse views regarding Project FREE and, more generally, regarding the politicians' programmatic appeals and inducements. We also recognize that such diversity may be influenced by factors other than socioeconomic status, such as educational background and age group. Despite these limitations, we believe that this exploratory study presented new insights into the voters' attitudes and perceptions regarding their local political leader's programmatic commitment, particularly in education that Filipino families highly value.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Following the People Power Revolution in 1986, Former President Corazon Aquino appointed Jejomar S. Binay as Makati's officer-in-charge. He was elected Makati mayor in the 1988 local elections, the first held under the 1987 Constitution. He served in that capacity until 1998. Due to the term limits imposed by the current charter, he made his wife, Dr. Elenita S. Binay, to succeed him. He returned as Makati mayor from 2001 to 2010, before entering national politics as Vice President from 2010 to 2016. The family patriarch was recognized for pioneering Makati City's notable innovative social programs, some of which became models for other LGUs in the country (e.g., comprehensive benefits for senior citizens, medical and hospitalization benefits or the "Yellow Card" program).
- 2 These are among the items included when the researchers conducted this study's data gathering right before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the city government added new items for the students to cope with the demands of remote learning.
- 3 Mar-len Abigail "Abby" Binay-Campos entered Makati's local politics when she was elected to the Philippine Congress as the city's 2nd district representative. In 2016, she became the fourth member of the Binay clan to serve as mayor of Makati since 1986.
- 4 In mid-2015, former Makati Vice Mayor Romulo "Kid" Peña, a political rival of the Binay clan, took over as the city's chief executive after the Ombudsman suspended then Mayor Jejomar Erwin "Junjun" Binay Jr. over the alleged irregularities in building contracts. Peña was Makati City's first non-Binay mayor since the family patriarch was elected in 1988.
- 5 The *barangay* is the smallest local government unit in the Philippines.

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