Journal of Governance and Local Politics (JGLP)
Vol. 8, No. 2, Nov 2026, pp. 270-286
Received Jul 12, 2026 □ Revised Sep 12, 2026 □ Accepted Sep 20, 2026

Criminal Indictments without Electoral Sanctions: Voter Rationality, Clientelism, and Trust in Philippine Elections

Lyrah L. Baylon, Maricel B. Legaspi, Shaira Maye R. Rico, Christine B. Tenorio*, Perla P. Palomares, Jack B. Isolana
Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology, Iligan City, Philippines
Corresponding Author: christine.tenorio@g.msuiit.edu.ph

Keyword:
Senatorial candidate;
Clientelism;
Distrust in political institutions;
Perceived political competence;
Rational choice theory

Abstract: Why do politicians with criminal indictments continue to gain support, if criminal activities are widely condemned? This study explores the possible factors that are rational motivations behind the continued support for figures facing criminal indictments in democracies in the Philippine context. These factors are perceived political competence (trade-off hypothesis) or clientelism (beneficial relationship) and distrust in political institutions. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines a structured survey of 400 registered voters in Iligan City with key informant interviews from civil society leaders, barangay officials, and members of the academe. Statistical analyses, including Pearson's r correlation and descriptive statistics, were complemented by thematic analysis of interviews. The findings reveal a differentiated pattern in voters' responses: perceived political competence and clientelism were associated descriptively with a greater inclination to support senatorial candidates despite criminal indictments, whereas distrust in political institutions was associated with an inclination not to support them. Correlation analysis further showed that distrust in political institutions had a strong and statistically significant relationship with voters' decisions not to support indicted candidates ($r = .740$, $p < .001$). In contrast, perceived political competence and clientelism showed no statistically significant relationship with the decision not to support, although both remained salient in the descriptive and qualitative findings. Qualitative data also reveal that voters often weigh expected benefits against ethical concerns when evaluating candidates. This research reframes voter behavior through the lenses of Rational Choice Theory and Social Exchange Theory, showing that support for indicted senatorial candidates and figures is often a calculated and rational response to systemic governance failures and predatory political environments which is supported by qualitative data.

INTRODUCTION

Across democracies in the world, the re-election of candidates with criminal allegations continues to be a recurring phenomenon. In India, nearly 43% of lawmakers elected in 2019 had pending criminal cases (Sharma, 2019). In Brazil, a staggering 60% of federal lawmakers were either convicted or under criminal investigation (Vaishnav, 2016).

The Philippines is no exception to this phenomenon, with its history of reinstating government leaders convicted of crimes even while in public office. Popular examples include former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Joseph Ejercito Estrada's serious corruption allegations and convictions to gain popular support and return. Past senatorial candidates and senators, and even the current Senators of the 20th Congress, such as Jinggoy Estrada, Lito Lapid, and more, have faced serious crimes such as plunder and corruption but remained popular. This raises the question: Why do politicians with criminal indictments continue to gain support, if criminal activities are widely condemned?

Several studies point to a trade-off between performance (perceived political competence) or beneficial relationship (clientelism), distrust in political institutions, and awareness (information hypothesis) of the voters that reflects their decision. Albeit these studies have different conclusions because the data come from different contexts.

Existing research highlights that voter decisions often involve a trade-off between the competence of candidates and corruption (Breitenstein, 2019; Rundquist et al., 1977; Kim-Leffingwell, 2023). The literature provides a theme in common, which is that voters rationalize on what benefits and protection the politicians can provide through their competence.

In terms of economic performance, when the corrupt candidate delivers a strong economic performance, they receive a weak negative effect, while poor economic performance reduces support for the corrupt politician (Breitenstein, 2019). Rundquist et al. (1977) also presented what is called implicit trading, where the voter would likely vote for the candidate if they have the same position, care about the same thing, and have the same intensity of concern (Kim-Leffingwell, 2023). These provide evidence that voters are willing to overlook a candidate's history of corruption and put a heavier weight on economic performance (Kim-Leffingwell, 2023).

In terms of security, a paper by Teehankee and Thompson (2016), both of whom have high standing in the political science field, stated that before Duterte became president, he was elected mayor in Davao, where people had "allowed him to rule with an iron fist in exchange for social peace and personal security" for 28 years. Citing the words of Randy David, a Philippine sociologist, "Duterte promises just one thing: the will and leadership to do what needs to be done—to the point of killing and putting one's own life on the line."

However, Galeotti and Zizzo (2018), on looking at the trade-off between competence and honesty of the candidates by the voters, found that, contrary to other literature, voters tend to put more importance on caring about honesty even if the payoffs are less. They argued that this bias could be because people think that being honest is heavier than being competent, because of beliefs such as that this is for risk aversion. They also concluded that if it goes against the idea that all voters are rational and profit-maximizing, then competency would have a larger weight than the two.

Clientelism is also a popular hypothesis in understanding this phenomenon. The study of Hutchcroft (2017) showed that patronage and clientelism are deeply entrenched in Philippine politics, often serving as a "political cement" between national and local levels through the distribution of projects and resources to supportive localities through the pork-barrel fund. In a political environment where the government is weak and cannot fulfil its duty to deliver basic services to people, voters may prioritize immediate access to public goods over the ethical or legal qualifications of political candidates. Due to the benefits provided by clientelist practices may become the reason why voters support candidates with criminal indictments (Khemka; 2024). This shows how chronic poverty and a lack of government indirectly influence voting decisions.

Interestingly, proximity is also considered in clientelism. Ravanilla, Davidson, and Hicken (2022) found that in the country, voters use their social proximity with candidates as a heuristic to inform their vote choice, demonstrating that familial and social networks are used to channel private inducements directly to voters. Local brokers, who are essential for clientelism, possess dense social networks and a detailed understanding of the community, which facilitates vote buying and the distribution of patronage. This applies to the low proximity between the voters and Senatorial Candidates, where national candidates often rely on local brokers, which provides an interesting literature gap on the effect on voting decisions of electorates.

Meanwhile, literature in distrust of political institutions shows contrasting results. Voters tolerate corruption or continue to vote for politicians linked to the criminal act of corruption because of the lack of non-corrupt political alternatives. Persistent criminality within the government can cause political resignations where the voters feel that they are incapable of changing the system and cannot trust the institutions of the government. Criminality becomes a norm and corruption, a prerequisite for those seeking office (Agerberg, 2019; Pavão , 2018).

However, a different result can be seen from the study of Banerjee et al. (2014), who found that Indian voters who experience misconduct often do not simply dismiss the allegations regarding criminality. Bertsou (2019) also found that expressive distrust in the political institutions can communicate discontent and even disapproval of the status quo. He differentiates liberal distrust, being critical and provides checks on people in power grounded in liberal democratic tradition, and political distrust, as defined as the people's perception of untrustworthiness and expectations of harmful effects of political systems and their components. This paper tested their political distrust.

One consistent thing, though, is that the lack of accountability and sanctions against those caught by self-interested politicians will only lead them to continue to have corrupt behavior or an increase in the number, together with the acceptance of society, and the collapse of the justice system. Even if people do not support convicted politicians, low-level corruption continues to exist, making some politicians find it advantageous and society indifferent. (De Dios and Ferrer, 2001)

Lastly, the reason is grounded on the information hypothesis, where voters blindly vote for corrupt leaders because they are unable to get reliable, detailed, and easily accessible information regarding the crime, especially in corruption cases. However, findings on the role of political information vary. Some studies suggest that higher awareness leads to negative responses toward corrupt and criminally accused politicians (Klašnja, 2017; Costas-Pérez et al., 2012), while others argue that it has no effect (Khemka, 2024) or even increases support for such politicians (Vaishnav, 2016). We acknowledge the varying arguments regarding political awareness and tolerance of corruption, but in this paper, awareness is only a control variable. However, following the information hypothesis, the majority of the literature shows how voters weigh the benefits and losses they can get based on the information they have, which influences their decision to support or not support.

For conceptual clarity, this study distinguishes criminal indictments from related concepts in the literature. Criminal allegations refer broadly to accusations that may not have resulted in formal criminal charges, while criminal indictments refer to formal charges brought through the applicable legal process. Corruption cases constitute a specific category of alleged criminal wrongdoing, whereas convictions involve a finding of guilt and are therefore analytically distinct from indictments. References to 'criminal politicians' in prior scholarship are retained only when reflecting the terminology used in those studies. In discussing its own empirical subjects, this study consistently refers to senatorial candidates with criminal indictments. Although existing studies have examined electoral support for politicians facing allegations of corruption or criminal wrongdoing, the literature remains fragmented across explanations centered on political information, institutional trust, perceived competence, and clientelist relationships. Less attention has been given to how these factors operate together in shaping voter responses to senatorial candidates facing criminal indictments in the Philippines context. This study addresses this gap by examining these factors among registered voters in Iligan City. The findings provide insights into voter decision-making and the broader challenge of electoral accountability.

Objective(s)

In light of the persistent re-election of candidates facing criminal indictments, it becomes essential to systematically examine the factors that shape voter decision-making within this context. While existing literature points to the roles of institutional trust, perceived competence, and clientelist relationships, there remains a need to empirically assess how these factors operate in influencing voter behavior in the Philippine setting. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research objectives:

RQ1. How do voters respond to the identified factors— distrust in political institutions, perceived political competence, and clientelism in relation to senatorial candidates with criminal indictments?

RQ2. Is there a relationship between voters' decisions and the identified factors — distrust in political institutions, perceived political competence, and clientelism?

Conceptual Framework

To address the research questions, this study extends to rational choice theory (RCT) and social exchange theory (SET). Rational choice theory (RCT) that promotes the notion that people make decisions to "maximize benefits and minimize costs...through a cost-benefit analysis of sorts by comparing the costs or benefits of different courses of action." The RCT can help answer questions that deal with trade-offs, the role of awareness, and distrust in political institutions

SET posits that individuals engage in relationships or decisions by weighing potential rewards (e.g., promises of development or personal benefits) against costs (e.g., ethical compromises or societal harm). The idea of this theory lies in the aspects of social interactions, cost-benefit analysis, and reactions of the people (Ahmad et al., 2023). Interaction, as

synonymous with "social behaviors," occurs when the action (or sentiment) of one individual leads to a response from another person, whether that response is a reward or punishment (Tittenbrun, 2012; Homans, 1961). SET can explain how voters' decisions are influenced by social dynamics and engage in relationships for power, such as in clientelism.

They were chosen as both of these theories relate to how people make decisions based on what they can get, whereas RCT weighs the costs and benefits, while SET focuses more on the reciprocal relationships and social exchanges between individuals and their environment, whether such an exchange results in a reward or punishment. SET complements RCT by emphasizing the role of social relationships and exchange in shaping voting preferences.

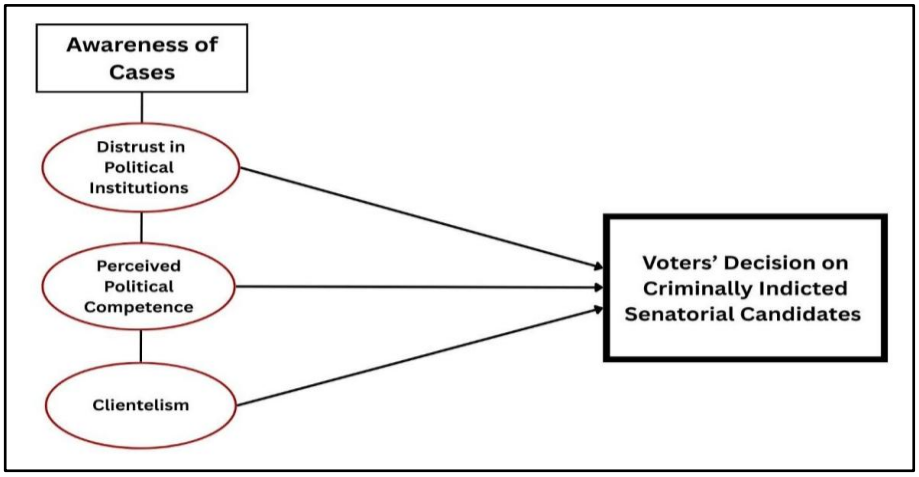


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

This figure reflects the hypothesized relationships of the independent variables (1) distrust in political institutions, (2) perceived political competence, and (3) clientelism that influences the dependent variable, the voter's decision towards senatorial candidates with criminal indictments. In addition, awareness serves as a control variable.

Hypothesis 1: Voters' Response to the Individual Factor

$H1_0$: Voters' responses to perceived political competence, clientelism, and distrust in political institutions do not indicate a general inclination to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments.

$H1_1$: Voters' responses to perceived political competence, clientelism, and distrust in political institutions indicate a general inclination to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments.

Hypothesis 2: Relationship between the voter's decision and individual factors

$H2_0$: There is no significant relationship between voters' decision not to support, and perceived political competence, clientelism, and distrust in political institutions.

$H2_1$" At least 1 of the factors has a significant relationship between voters' decision not to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments

RESEARCH METHODS

1. Population and Samples

This study was conducted in 12 barangays within Iligan City, Philippines. The City's population reflects a mix of indigenous people, migrants, and urban influence shaped by its history and economic development. This diversity offers a variety of social groups ideal for achieving a wider perspective and understanding of voters' decisions.

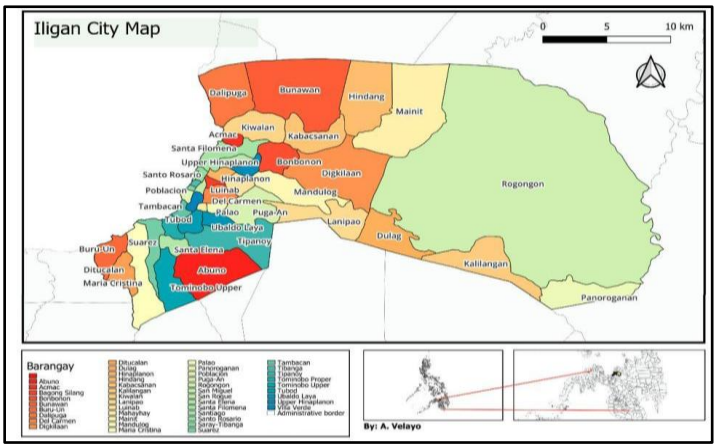


Figure 2: Iligan City's Political Map

The quantitative participants of this study are the registered voters in Iligan City who are at least 18 years old and above, chosen through purposive random sampling. For this, a survey was used to a total of 400 participants, which is derived from Slovin's formula. In this formula, the study calculated the number of respondents to achieve reliable results with a 0.05 or 5% margin of error, and a confidence level of 95%. The calculated sample size is:

$$n=N/ (1+Ne^2)$$
$$n=185,452/(1+185,452 (0.05)^2)$$
$$n=185,452/(1+185,452 (0.0025))$$
$$n=185,452/(1+463.63)$$
$$n=185,452/464.63$$
$$n=399.13 \text{ or } 400$$

On the other hand, the qualitative participants are key informants which include the following: (1) Civil Society Organizations, (2) Barangay Leaders, and (3) Members of the Academe.

2. Research Instrument

This research study employs two research instruments: (1) a Survey Questionnaire and (2) Key informant interviews (KII). The survey questionnaire for this study is structured into two distinct sections. The first section focuses on the demographic characteristics of respondents in Iligan City. The second section explores respondents' perceptions of senatorial candidates with criminal indictments by answering the 5-point Likert-scale survey. In this part, respondents were asked to respond to the questions aimed to assess the pre-identified factors such as distrust in political institutions, perceived political competence, and clientelism as well as how these factors influence their voting decisions regarding senatorial candidates with criminal indictments. Alongside the survey, this research also incorporates key informant interviews with experts and stakeholders who have an extensive understanding of electoral dynamics.

3. Collection of Data

The study employed a systematic data collection process divided into three distinct phases: preparation stage, quantitative data collection, and qualitative data collection. The preparation stage was focused on securing all necessary authorizations and ensuring the quality of data collection instruments. This phase began by obtaining formal approvals from the adviser, panel, and ethics review board. The research questionnaires were also subjected to pre-testing using Cronbach's alpha to assess the reliability and validity of the questions. The second phase involved quantitative data collection methods that lasted two months. The survey questionnaire was administered primarily via face-to-face by the researchers to clarify any questions in real-time to

the 400 respondents across Iligan City via a purposive sampling method. This effort was supplemented by distributing a QR code linked to a Google online survey form for those that were unable to complete the survey at that moment to answer at their available time, thereby increasing participation flexibility.

The third phase is qualitative data collection. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with 5 experts and individuals involved in the electoral process using the purposive sampling method. The study employed a concurrent triangulation design, meaning the surveys and the KII interview were collected simultaneously during the data-gathering phase. This design aims to use both qualitative and quantitative data collected at the same time to gain a more complete and accurate understanding of the relationships between variables being studied as well as validate the results from each method by using the evidence produced by one method to confirm or reinforce the findings generated by the other.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitatively, the variables were operationalized through a survey questionnaire. Through a 27-item survey, the factors were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The internal consistency of these measurements was validated through a pilot study yielding an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.77. Here, distrust in political institutions refers to the level of skepticism voters have toward government institutions, and the belief that every politician is corrupt and unlawful, and corruption is an issue that public officers fail to manage (Pavão, 2018). This was measured using our (4) Likert-scale items.

For political competence, Brinkmann (2018) defined it as "the ability to perform some politics-related task well… it is a type of performance competence." Perceived political competence, therefore, is operationalized as voters' evaluations of a candidate's ability to deliver economic progress, public safety, and governance. This was measured using five (5) Likert-scale items. Clientelism wherein it is a system of distribution of goods, services, or other benefits from authorities or parties to individuals in exchange for political support, often discretionary and partisan in manner, instead of programmatic. This was measured using five (5) Likert-scale items assessing respondents' attitude toward vote-buying, financial support, and other clientelistic practices. Lastly, awareness of cases, as a control variable in this study, refers to the extent to which voters are informed about criminal indictments related to senatorial candidates in the country. This was measured using seven (7) Likert-scale items.

To complement the data from the survey, the study also employed Key informant Interviews. As experts in information, their interviews were used as an addition to the surveys to provide possible additional themes that are crucial in understanding the context behind their voting decisions. The quantitative data gathered in this study were analyzed through IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a software application that can perform quantitative analysis on complex data and is widely utilized by researchers across different fields. To assess the reliability and validity of the scales used to measure identified factors, Cronbach's alpha was utilized through the program, yielding an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.77.

Table 1. *Reliability Test - Cronbach's α*

Factors	Items	Cronbach's α	Remark
Distrust in Political Institutions	4	0.80	Acceptable
Perceived Political Competence	5	0.94	Excellent
Clientelism	5	0.87	Excellent
Awareness	7	0.83	Acceptable
Overall	***21***	0.77	***Good***

The statistical tool Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, or just Pearson r, was also used in IBM SPSS to test the relationships. Pearson r was applied to assess the strength and direction of association between variables measured at an approximate interval level. On the other hand, the descriptive quantitative components that measure the response of voters were derived from the computed mean scores of responses for each item.

Meanwhile, the analysis of the qualitative data collected from the interviews and transcribed through thematic analysis was encoded manually. This paper employed concurrent triangulation of mixed methods, a common approach among qualitative researchers where both qualitative and quantitative data are collected at the same time to validate the results from each method by using the evidence produced by one method to confirm or reinforce the findings generated by the other (Andrew et al. 2009). The qualitative information collected from these interviews enhanced the survey results by providing detailed viewpoints that structured questionnaires may not fully reflect.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section shows the results of the survey regarding the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of their age, income, education level, and the area type they reside in.

Table 2. Demographic Profile

Profile	Category	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Age	**Under 25**	**115**	**28.75**	**28.75**
	25-34	68	17.00	45.75
	35-44	66	16.50	62.25
	45-54	66	16.50	78.75
	55-64	48	12.00	90.75
	65 and above	37	9.25	100.00
Income	Student/Unemployed	**127**	**31.75**	31.75
	Less than 11k	170	42.50	74.25
	11-22k	62	15.50	89.75
	23k-44k	31	7.75	97.50
	45-77k	6	1.50	99.00
	78-132k	2	0.50	99.50
	133-220k	1	0.25	99.75
	More than 220k	1	0.25	100.00
Education Level	No Education	0	0.00	0.00
	Vocational Course/TESDA/others	8	2.00	2.00
	ALS	4	1.00	3.00
	Elementary Level	28	7.00	10.00
	Elementary Graduate	28	7.00	17.00

	High School Level	**54**	**13.50**	30.50
	High School Graduate	82	20.50	51.00
	College Level	136	34.00	85.00
	College Graduate	45	11.25	96.25
	Master's Level	4	1.00	97.25
	Master's Degree	4	1.00	98.25
	Doctorate Level	4	1.00	99.25
	Doctorate Degree	3	0.75	100.00
Area Type	**Rural**	**109**	**27.25**	27.25
	Urban	291	72.75	100.00
Total		***400***		***100.00***

Table 2 is a frequency table that displays the demographic profile of the survey questionnaire respondents. It showed that there were a total of 400 respondents, where most of them were aged under 25 years old (n=115), while the least were voters aged 65 and above (n=37). In terms of income, most of the respondents are already earning, and most of them earn less than Php 11,000 (n=170) followed by voters who are currently students or unemployed, who are most likely not earning yet (n=127). Despite this, we still have respondents who are earning between Php 133,000 to Php 220,000 (n=1) and earning more than Php 220,000 (n=1).

Additionally, all respondents are educated, and most of them are in college (n=136) followed by high school graduates (n=82), while the least were doctorate or PhD degree holders (n=3). Lastly, the respondents were divided into two area types: rural and urban. Most of the respondents were from urban areas, consisting of 291 respondents, while 109 were from rural areas as expected from the calculated sample size through proportional allocation.

Level of Awareness

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistic of the Level of Awareness of Cases*

Factors	Mean	Qualitative Interpretation	Interpretation
Awareness of Cases	3.58	Agree	Respondents agree that if they are aware of the criminal cases, they will not vote for the senatorial candidate.

The table shows the summarized analysis of voters' responses regarding their awareness of criminal charges. Most of the respondents agreed that they actively sought information about a candidate's criminal records and paid close attention to news related to them. They further agreed that criminal charges against senatorial candidates influenced their voting decision. Respondents also agreed that if they are aware of a senatorial candidate's criminal charges, they will not vote for them and would discourage their family from doing so. This suggests that most participants possess a moderate level of knowledge about such cases.

Hypothesis Testing Results

The decisions for quantitative components were derived from the computed mean scores of responses for each item. These mean values were then categorized into five equal intervals, with scores ranging from 1.00 to 1.80 interpreted as Strongly Disagree, up to scores from 4.21 to 5.00 interpreted as Strongly Agree.

Hypothesis 1: Voters Response to the Individual Factors

H10: Voters' responses to perceived political competence, clientelism, and distrust in political institutions do not indicate a general inclination to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments.

H11: Voters' responses to perceived political competence, clientelism, and distrust in political institutions indicate a general inclination to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments.

Table 5 *Voters' Responses to the Pre-identified factors and its influence on their voting decisions.*

Factors	Mean	Qualitative Interpretation	Interpretation
Distrust in Political Institutions	3.99	Agree	Most respondents agree that they become distrustful of political institutions, and that they reject senatorial candidates with criminal indictments.
Perceived Political Competence	3.49	Agree	Respondents generally agree that the perceived political competence of politicians increases their likelihood of supporting a senatorial candidate with criminal indictments.
Clientelism	3.50	Agree	Respondents agree that when they experience clientelist practices, they are more likely to support candidates with criminal indictments.

Overall, the quantitative data provide that voters' responses do indicate a general inclination to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments for factors such as perceived political competence and clientelism, accepting the alternative hypothesis H11. However, they do not indicate a general inclination to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments if respondents have distrust in political institutions, accepting the null hypothesis.

However, in deeper aspects of the response, all items got an "Agree" response except item C5 of clientelism, which received a "Neutral" response. This item focuses on whether voters will respond positively or negatively to promised benefits. It was found that voters are less likely to support candidates who mentioned promised benefits, indicating that there is no previous relationship built between the candidates and the voters, and promises are not enough to feel utang na loob that will make voters reciprocate.

Pearson r Hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Relationship between the voter's decision and individual factors

H20: There is no significant relationship between voters' decision not to support and perceived political competence, clientelism, and distrust in political institutions.

H21: At least 1 of the factors has a significant relationship between voters' decision not to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments

Correlation (absolute value of r)	Strength Classification
0.00 – 0.19	Very Weak
0.20 – 0.39	Weak
0.40 – 0.59	Moderate
0.60 – 0.79	Strong
0.80 – 1.00	Very Strong

Table 6. *Correlation Summary of Voters' Decision NOT TO SUPPORT and Factors*

Factor	R-value	p-value	Interpretation
Distrust in Political Institutions	0.740	p < .001	Strong positive relationship
Perceived Political Competence	-0.025	p > .05	No relationship
Clientelism	-0.022	p > .05	No relationship

In the correlation table, the analysis shows distrust in political institutions had a statistically significant positive correlation with the decision not to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments, verifying hypothesis H21. This suggests that as distrust of the case increased, the voter's decision not to support increased, and vice versa. Meanwhile, the qualitative data suggest that perceived political competence could shape voters' decisions, but the results from Pearson's r revealed no significant relationship between the voter's decision not to support and perceived political competence; a similar pattern was found for clientelism. Providing the null hypothesis for these variables is accepted. This contradiction in qualitative and quantitative findings highlights an important nuance—voters may acknowledge that perceived political competence and benefits matter in the matter of theory, but these factors alone are not the sole drivers of voters' support for senatorial candidates with criminal indictment. It is important to consider party affiliation, personal beliefs, political loyalty, and fear of admitting bias. Thus, these two factors are extensively discussed in much literature as having been influencing voters' decisions, but due to social desirability, their effect on not supporting candidates with criminal indictments is not strong enough to conclude a meaningful relationship between these variables.

Overall, the findings suggest that distrust in political institutions has the strongest correlation among the factors, indicating that this is an important factor in understanding voters' decisions on senatorial candidates with criminal indictments.

Key Qualitative Insights

The data from the key informant interview confirms that the identified factors indeed affect the decision of voters whether to support or reject senatorial candidates indicted for criminal offenses. The differing results highlight the importance of a mixed-method approach in understanding both the generalizable trends in politics as well as the subtle voting behavior of voters.

Distrust in Political Institution

The qualitative data reveal that people are losing hope in the government because of the structural and historical inefficiencies of the country's political institutions that contribute to their distrust. They note that though the country has democratic elements, they fail to bridge the laws towards alleviating poverty and providing accountability. Historically, there's a lack of accountability towards politicians in national positions with criminal indictments, which leads to their continual presence in the government and serving their interests. In addition, poor quality of services, lack of electoral reforms, and continual domination of political dynasties make common people lose their trust in the government that is under the same people who were entrenched in controversies and corruption. According to one key informant:

> K2: "Unlike some of our neighbors, we have a vibrant democracy and civil society, but the gap between our laws and the lived reality of the poor is where corruption thrives. It fuels the very conflicts we are trying to heal."

All this explains the condition of why distrust exists. This leads them to lose faith in political institutions, where they become more suspicious of candidates with legal controversies. As one key informant stated:

> K5: (Translation) In the government it's not what you know, whom you know, that's politics. Though not all (politicians), there are those who are good. To be truthful, people really lose their trust in government institutions.

However, not all voters distrust political institutions. Some key informants highlighted pragmatic trust. One informant in the academe stated that biases in the case, whether they are favorable to them or these institutions favor their preferred candidate, affect their distrust in political institutions. Based on both the qualitative data and quantitative data, results suggest that distrust in political institutions is associated with the voting decisions of Iligan City, as indicated by the overall "Agree" result and the consensus of the key informant interviewees. The qualitative findings also provided the possible cause of distrust, which contributed to this distrust.

Perceived Political Competence

Qualitative data reveal that the perceived competence of senatorial candidates influences voters to support these candidates despite criminal indictments against them. One key informant provides that voters are more inclined to support candidates who benefit the public despite the presence of corruption.

> K2: "I have seen communities support leaders who provided a water system, even if they were accused of stealing the funds for the next one."

This might be due to several reasons, such as the necessity for aid or a project. Additionally, another informant stated that low-income voters are targeted by politicians with a facade of public service for good image, propaganda, and additional opportunities for corruption. The qualitative data further strengthened results from quantitative data that perceived political competence affects the voting decision of voters, indicated by the "Agree" result. Voters tend to prioritize the possible benefits that they can get from a candidate. This shows a morality-competence trade-off assessment wherein voters may overlook criminal indictments of a candidate if the benefit that they can get outweighs the criminal indictment or if the candidate is deemed effective and capable in the realm of public service and can deliver advantages to the community.

Clientelism

The qualitative data reveal that clientelist practices affect the decision of voters to support candidates (including those who are facing or have faced criminal indictments), as they are being used by politicians to appeal to the voters. This is because the election in the Philippines is heavily affected by money politics. The distribution of cash and aid has been normalized so that even though vote-buying is considered illegal in the country, it continues to be a major factor that affects the decision of voters. Due to the benefits that voters can acquire from a candidate, they become more inclined to support them regardless of their cases.

> K2: "When a candidate hands out aid during a campaign, it's not charity; it's a transaction. It creates a debt of gratitude (utang na loob) that makes it very difficult for a voter to see the candidate's flaws, including criminal charges."
>
> The problem is not entirely about how people are incapable of voting for the right candidates. Instead, it's the politicians who make the voters incapable by not delivering enough services to them, which makes them reliant on the help of politicians.
>
> K4: "Ang tawag ana is (You call that) predatory governance in which you make the citizens dependent on you, Why? Because if they are dependent on you, which means in this cycle, they will always choose you."
>
> There is a centralized finding from the qualitative and quantitative data for the role of clientelism in the decision of voters towards senatorial candidates with criminal indictments, that it has a positive impact on voter support.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that voters in Iligan City show a general inclination to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments, particularly when they have experienced clientelism and perceived these candidates as politically competent. However, those who exhibit distrust in political institutions show the opposite, often rejecting these candidates. Among the factors examined, distrust in political institutions is the most statistically significant predictor of voters' decisions not to support these candidates. Meanwhile, perceived political competence and clientelism did not show a significant statistical relationship with voting decisions but were acknowledged by respondents and reinforced by qualitative insights as shaping voter attitudes.

Discussion

This section explains and applies the results in greater depth, the unexpected and expected findings. It includes comparing and supporting the paper's results with the findings from other studies and extends to the theories used.

Political Distrust and Its Implications for Electoral Accountability

The findings of this study provide important implications for understanding electoral accountability. Democracy relies on voters holding politicians who are criminal, corrupt, or engaged in conduct unbecoming of public servants accountable by voting them out while rewarding honest leaders with re-election. As stated before, the country has a history of re-electing politicians with criminal cases, even those with grave crimes such as graft and corruption.

Results of this study indicate that accountability is limited, uneven, and conditional but remains present. Voters demonstrate a willingness to reject candidates with criminal indictments, particularly when there is a high level of institutional distrust and awareness is present. The result for awareness is consistent with the studies on the information hypothesis, showing that if voters are informed, they hold politicians accountable, leading to negative responses toward corrupt and criminally accused politicians (Klašnja, 2017; Costas-Pérez et al., 2012; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013).

However, the most significant and unexpected finding is the strong positive relationship between distrust in political institutions and the decision not to support indicted candidates. The strong role of distrust in discouraging support contrasts with studies such as Agerberg (2019), Pavão (2018), and De Dios and Ferrer (2001), which show that when people lose their trust in the government, they choose to disregard the criminal indictments, and society would accept corruption. Instead, this study aligns more closely with Banerjee et al. (2014) which suggest that distrust can express dissatisfaction and motivate rejection of problematic candidates. Banerjee et al. (2014) found that Indian voters who experience misconduct often do not simply dismiss the allegations regarding criminality, while Bertsou (2019) found that expressive distrust in the political institutions can communicate discontent and even disapproval of the status quo.

This paper suggests a manifestation of political distrust. People's perception of the political institution as untrustworthy and the criminality of politicians is a norm, turning into liberal distrust. Here, people become suspicious of politicians and abuse of power; they extend this skepticism toward candidates associated with criminality. In addition, qualitative data also provided a nuanced finding. The key informants argued that the cause of voters' distrust was the inefficiency of the country's political institutions, coupled with the lack of accountability. This means that, surprisingly, what was a result of the lack of accountability reveals itself to be a factor for accountability.

However, there are also things to consider. Bertsou (2019) who argued that both trust and distrust of democratic institutions are necessary and exist in democracies. He further argued that the presence of political distrust is not wrong because this is also important in understanding the deficiencies of the political systems. However, for democracies to function, political trust is needed. Moreover, De Dios and Ferrer (2001) also argued that even if people do not support convicted politicians, low-level corruption continues to exist, making some politicians find it advantageous and society indifferent. This means that long-term distrust, if not addressed, becomes a problem to democracy as it could erode institutional legitimacy, collaboration, and citizen engagement. Distrust alone, despite its strong association with rejecting senatorial candidates with criminal indictments, may be insufficient to ensure accountability over time if weak institutional structures against criminality and corruption persist.

Therefore, although this study finds that distrust in political institutions can push voters towards having more accountable electoral choices, it also shows that there is a need for deeper structural reforms such as strengthening institutional transparency, improving governance efficiency, and enforcing accountability mechanisms.

Voter Rationality and Ethical Standards: The role of Perceived Political Competence and Clientelism

The findings of this study provide important implications for understanding electoral accountability in relation to the rational choice theory (RCT) and social exchange theory (SET) applied in the study. Quantitative findings and descriptive statistics imply that voters have beliefs, needs, and desires as their motivating factors in making electoral decisions, where they appear to negotiate between ethical standards and expected benefits, grounded in rationality where their decisions are shaped by challenges, including economic needs and governance performance.

The result for clientelism highlights utility maximization (see table 5), where voters weigh the risk of voting or not voting for candidates with corruption and criminal ties against the potential benefits they might get from the candidates' political platforms, patronage, and aid. A deeper insight into the responses of voters in this study reveals that the majority of respondents agreed that they felt obligated to support a candidate even with criminal indictment if they personally and their family benefited from them. Respondents expressed agreement to support candidates who benefited them or their community, regardless of whether such benefits had outweighed concerns about criminal charges. Overall, it is clear that voters are rational in that their perceptions and attitudes are underpinned by the benefits they could gain.

This aligned with Breteinstein (2019) and Kim-Leffingwell (2023), who argued that rational choice through trade-off may result in voters overlooking candidates' corruption if they deliver strong economic performance. In addition, Rundquist et al. (1977) also suggest that voters may engage in an implicit exchange when evaluating candidates, weighing a candidate's integrity against their stance on key policies or issues, especially in this study where these perceived competencies vary from economic to public safety.

The study of Hutchcroft (2020) showed that patronage and clientelism are deeply entrenched in Philippine politics, often serving as a "political cement" between national and local levels through the distribution of projects and resources to supportive localities through pork-barrel funds. In addition, according to Kuo (2018), vote buying is somehow a way for some voters, especially those that are marginalized in political engagement and low-income earners, to ensure that they can get benefits from the government. This aligns with the results of the study.

Politicians who make the voters incapable by not delivering enough services to citizens makes them reliant on their personal services. In many countries, clientelist parties and political machines distribute selective benefits, especially to the poor, in direct exchange for electoral support (Nichter, 2010). According to Maboloc (2019), the poor Filipino people have been put in a situation that impacts the way they think and choose candidates. Moreover, one key informant stated:

> K2: "For as long as people are in desperate need, they will prioritize a leader who offers immediate relief over one who offers a distant promise of integrity."

The same goes with perceived political competence, where results complement the trade-off hypothesis. Notably, in their responses, the findings on this factor suggested that most respondents had been inclined to support candidates with criminal charges when those candidates exhibited political competence, particularly in areas related to economic development and social welfare. Key informants explained that voters prioritize the perceived political competence of senatorial candidates, such as delivery of services, aid, and other tangible benefits, despite the presence of indictments of criminal offenses like corruption. Voters tend to prioritize the possible benefits that they can get from a candidate.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) reveals that voters are rational and evaluate candidates based on cost-benefit analysis, considering personal benefits. Moreover, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) allows us to understand the complexity of the role of clientelism and perceived political competence. It explains why respondents collectively agree that they are likely to support candidates despite their cases if those candidates provide them with benefits such as aid, jobs, and more, because it highlights the reciprocal relationship of the voters and the candidates, where benefits received are reciprocated through providing support Tittenbrun (2017); Homans (1961).

Promises and Proximity: Interpreting Unexpected Findings and Contextual Variations

Unexpected results of this study also reveal nuances. The first is when voters remain neutral (see voters' responses to clientelism) in overlooking the indictments based on "promised" benefits, indicating that they remain skeptical of candidates' promises as the benefits have not yet been received, and that there is no previous relationship built between the candidates and the voters. Promises are not enough to feel utang na loob that will make voters reciprocate. Through the lens of SET, where social exchanges are contingent upon rewarding reactions, in this situation, there's no certainty that the reward would be given; therefore, the senatorial candidates' party cannot leverage influence or positive response over voters.

Second, what can be deduced from the lack of a significant relationship between clientelism and perceived political competence on the decision of voters not to support a candidate with criminal indictments, but supported by the other data sets, is that these differences may be affected by proximity. This is where voters cannot directly monitor national candidates' accomplishments compared to local candidates, and while competence matters for them, other factors, for instance, distrust, can override its effect.

In local elections, particularly at the barangay or mayoral level, geographic proximity plays a crucial role in enabling clientelistic practices. Local politicians often have more direct and personal relationships with voters, allowing for closer monitoring and enforcement of clientelistic exchanges. Evidence from the Philippines shows that voters use their social proximity with candidates as heuristics to inform their vote choice, demonstrating that familial and social networks are used to channel private inducements directly to voters (Ravillana, Davidson, Hicken, 2022). This is because local brokers, who are essential for clientelism, possess dense social networks and a detailed understanding of the community, which facilitates vote buying and the distribution of patronage (Ravillana, Haim, and Hick, 2021). National-level campaigns also often focus on broader policy issues, party platforms, and candidate charisma, rather than the individualized material benefits characteristic of clientelism. These interpersonal connections are significantly weakened or absent in larger, more geographically dispersed senatorial or national election contests, where it becomes impractical for candidates to maintain such intimate relationships with a vast electorate.

This can also explain why clientelism and perceived political competence had little to no effect on the national level and more on the local level. As literature provides, the proximity of local officials or candidates allows them to have direct social interactions with the voters. Their proximity also allows immediate social exchange, may it be a reward or punishment, because they can benefit from local candidates quickly and directly compared to senatorial candidates. Moreover, due to the monitoring capacity of local candidates, punishment for not supporting candidates despite receiving benefits is more likely to be possible at the local level than the potential punishment of doing the same to the senatorial candidates, thus weakening the link of clientelism and perceiving a candidate to be politically competent at the national level, particularly for senatorial candidates.

CONCLUSSION

Employing a mixed-methods design enabled this study to capture both quantitative patterns and qualitative insights into how voters evaluate senatorial candidates with criminal indictments. The findings reveal important differences across the descriptive, inferential, and qualitative evidence. At the descriptive level, respondents expressed greater willingness to consider supporting candidates when they perceived them as politically competent or when clientelist benefits were present. These findings suggest conditional openness to support under particular circumstances; however, they should not be interpreted as evidence that perceived political competence and clientelism are statistically associated with voters' decisions.

At the inferential level, distrust in political institutions was the only factor that demonstrated a statistically significant relationship with voters' decisions not to support senatorial candidates with criminal indictments ($r = .740$, $p < .001$). Greater distrust was associated with a stronger inclination to reject these candidates. In contrast, perceived political

competence (r = −.025, p = .614) and clientelism (r = −.022, p = .657) did not demonstrate statistically significant relationships with the voting-decision measure. Thus, although respondents descriptively acknowledged competence and clientelist considerations when evaluating candidates, the quantitative evidence does not establish these factors as significantly associated with their reported decision not to support candidates with criminal indictments.

The qualitative findings provide additional context for understanding these patterns. Interview participants described political competence, material benefits, and distrust in political institutions as considerations that may enter voters' evaluations of candidates. These accounts illuminate how voters may reason about the potential benefits and costs associated with supporting candidates facing criminal indictments. However, these qualitative perceptions are treated as contextual explanations of voter reasoning rather than as confirmation of statistically significant relationships. The divergence between the quantitative and qualitative findings therefore highlights the complexity of voter decision-making: factors that voters recognize or discuss as relevant considerations may not necessarily demonstrate a measurable statistical association with their reported voting decisions.

Taken together, the findings contribute to understanding electoral accountability in the Philippine context by showing that voter responses to criminal indictments cannot be explained solely through perceived competence or clientelist benefits. Most notably, the strong association between institutional distrust and decisions not to support indicted candidates suggests that distrust does not necessarily result in political resignation or greater tolerance of candidates facing criminal charges. Among the respondents in Iligan City, greater distrust was instead associated with stronger rejection of such candidates. At the same time, the descriptive and qualitative findings indicate that perceptions of competence and clientelist benefits remain part of how some voters evaluate political candidates, even though these factors were not statistically associated with the measured voting decision.

Overall, the study demonstrates that electoral accountability is complex and conditional. Voters may recognize potential benefits associated with political competence or clientelist relationships while still withholding electoral support from candidates facing criminal indictments. The findings therefore underscore an important distinction between what voters perceive as relevant when evaluating candidates and what is statistically associated with their reported electoral decisions. Future research may examine whether these relationships hold across other localities and electoral contexts in the Philippines and explore additional factors that may explain when criminal indictments translate into electoral sanctions.

Limitations and Future Studies

Following the study of Sengupta et al. (2020), this paper also believes in the constructivist approach, wherein the phenomenon of a study revolves around a specific context and time. Thus, the findings are context-bound and do not seek to generalize their findings. The study's scope aims to explore and provide insight into the voting decision of Iligan City towards senatorial candidates with criminal indictments in relation to perceived political competence, clientelism, and distrust in political institutions. However, future studies may use this as a reference and explore the nuances presented in this study. The researchers also recommend diverting the focus from national-level candidates to local-level candidates to identify whether or not there is a unique insight when it comes to the decision of voters on local candidates with crime.

REFERENCES

Agerberg, M. (2020). The lesser evil? Corruption voting and the importance of clean alternatives. *Comparative Political Studies, 53*(2), 253–287. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019852697

Ahmad, R., Nawaz, M. R., Ishaq, M. I., Khan, M. M., & Ashraf, H. A. (2023). Social exchange theory: Systematic review and future directions. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 1015921. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1015921

Andrew, S., & Halcomb, E. J. (Eds.). (2009). *Mixed methods research for nursing and the health sciences*. Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444316490

Banerjee, A., Green, D. P., McManus, J., & Pande, R. (2014). Are poor voters indifferent to whether elected leaders are criminal or corrupt? A vignette experiment in rural India. *Political Communication, 31*(3), 391–407. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.914615

Bertsou, E. (2019). Rethinking political distrust. *European Political Science Review, 11*(2), 213–230. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773919000080

Breitenstein, S. (2019). Choosing the crook: A conjoint experiment on voting for corrupt politicians. *Research & Politics, 6*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019832230

Brinkmann, M. (2018). The concept of political competence. *Critical Review, 30*(3–4), 163–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2018.1572974

Costas-Pérez, E., Solé-Ollé, A., & Sorribas-Navarro, P. (2012). Corruption scandals, voter information, and accountability. *European Journal of Political Economy, 28*(4), 469–484. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2012.05.007

De Dios, E. S., & Ferrer, R. D. (2001). Corruption in the Philippines: Framework and context. *Public Policy Journal, 5*(1), 1–42. https://serp-p.pids.gov.ph/publication/public/view?slug=corruption-in-the-philippines-framework-and-context

Galeotti, F., & Zizzo, D. J. (2018). Identifying voter preferences: The trade-off between honesty and competence. *European Economic Review, 105*, 27–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2018.03.007

Khemka, A. (2024). Why do voters elect criminal politicians? *European Journal of Political Economy, 82*, 102527. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2024.102527

Kim-Leffingwell, S. (2023). Authoritarian legacies and partisan bias in corruption voting. *Journal of East Asian Studies, 23*(2), 241–262. https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2023.5

Klašnja, M. (2017). Uninformed voters and corrupt politicians. *American Politics Research, 45*(2), 256–279. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X16684574

Kuo, D. (2018). Clientelism as a failure of governance: A theory of business, parties, and programmatic demands. In *Clientelism, capitalism, and democracy: The rise of programmatic politics in the United States and Britain* (pp. 13–42). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108679923.002

Maboloc, C. R. (2019). The predatory state and radical politics: The case of the Philippines. *Journal of ASEAN Studies, 7*(2), 162–175. https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v7i2.6163

Nichter, S. (2010). *Politics and poverty: Electoral clientelism in Latin America*. California Digital Library. https://escholarship.org/content/qt7g18v9sx/qt7g18v9sx_noSplash_69e85fee2f3ab395522b947b3ff4cbd7.pdf

Pavão, N. (2018). Corruption as the only option: The limits to electoral accountability. *The Journal of Politics, 80*(3), 996–1010. https://doi.org/10.1086/697954

Ravanilla, N., Haim, D., & Hicken, A. (2022). Brokers, social networks, reciprocity, and clientelism. *American Journal of Political Science, 66*(4), 795–812. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12604

Ravanilla, N., Davidson, M., Jr., & Hicken, A. (2022). Voting in clientelistic social networks: Evidence from the Philippines. *Comparative Political Studies, 55*(10), 1663–1697. https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211060275

Rundquist, B. S., Strom, G. S., & Peters, J. G. (1977). Corrupt politicians and their electoral support: Some experimental observations. *American Political Science Review, 71*(3), 954–963. https://doi.org/10.2307/1960100

Sengupta, S., Mukherjee, S., & Jebarajakirthy, C. (2020). Voting decision-making at the bottom of the pyramid: A phenomenological approach. *Journal of Political Marketing, 22*(1), 34–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2020.1823933

Sharma, A. (2019, June 16). Indian election reveals role of money as 43% of MPs face criminal charges. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/indian-election-reveals-role-of-money-as-43-percent-of-mps-face-criminal-charges-20190616-p51y6t.html

Sondej, A. R. (2015). Theory and organization. In *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences* (pp. 1–26). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-801628-2.00001-4

Teehankee, J. C., & Thompson, M. R. (2016). Electing a strongman. *Journal of Democracy, 27*(4), 125–134. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0068