2022 National Elections and Foreign Policy Preferences

Discussion Paper Series

January 2022
Introduction

The national elections have cemented its position as the most awaited episode in Philippine politics as Filipinos will be given the opportunity to elect top leaders of the country. This also serves as a critical time for Filipinos to express and highlight a wide array of public policy concerns. As of January 2022, there are five dominant presidential candidates on the table — a son of the former dictator and senator, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr.; long-time senator and former Chief of the Philippine National Police, Panfilo “Ping” Lacson; boxing icon, Senator Emmanuel “Manny” Pacquiao; current mayor of Manila City, Francisco “Isko Moreno” Domagoso; and lastly, former legislator, lawyer, and the current Vice President of the Philippines, Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo.

With the 2022 National Elections taking place a few months from now, it becomes more important to shed some light on the perceptions of the Filipinos and how they seek to conceptualize the direction to which the country should be heading in the national and international levels. Moreover, this is also an opportunity to envision who they see fit to carry on such a daunting task. Confronting the US-China power competition, asserting Philippine sovereign rights over the West Philippine Sea, addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and global climate change, promoting regional security community in the ASEAN, and supporting the welfare of Filipinos overseas are a few of the many concerns that the next administration should prioritize.

The International Development and Security Cooperation (IDSC) conducted a special study on its 2022 National Elections and Foreign Policy Preferences (Discussion Paper Series) and commissioned the WR Numero Research for its opinion poll which would be of great instrument for the future of the next president of the Republic of the Philippines.

This special study conducted a digital survey using multiple levels of statistical interventions in order to improve the representativeness of the results to the Philippine population and voting population.
The recruitment of respondents is purposive to mirror the Philippine population and the voting population. During the data gathering period, quotas are assigned to avoid underrepresentation or overrepresentation. The data is then subjected to an iterative process where weights are applied proportional to the Philippine voting population, which basically creates an additional layer of adjustments to ensure representativeness. These three levels ensure the accuracy and reliability of the survey.

**Leni Robredo gains more credibility in TV debates**

The most recent survey indicates that former senator Marcos Jr. is on the lead with Vice President Robredo tailing behind at second place. However, the statistics provided by WR Numero Research also interestingly show that the survey results from January 23-27 saw a significant decline for Marcos Jr. while Robredo continued to gain more credibility.

**Presidential Preference January 23-27 (January Week 4)**
As seen in the recent survey from 23-27 January, Vice President Leni Robredo is now at 20% -- a 4% rise from the survey results on 2-7 January. Robredo is followed by Isko Moreno Domagoso (9%), Ping Lacson (4.12%), and Manny Pacquiao (2.41%). Meanwhile, 14.08% are undecided. On the other hand, support for Bongbong Marcos declined by 9% from 59% and is currently at 50%. Marcos’ lessened support could be due to the disqualification cases against him following his failure to file for income tax return (ITR) from 1982 to 1985. In addition, his refusal to attend interviews reduces his chance to convey his platform.

Indicative to the survey, the main question asked for the choice of president is: “Kung ngayong araw ang eleksyon, sino sa mga sumusunod ang iboboto mong pangulo?” (If the election is held today, who is your president?).

**Presidential Preference for January 2-7 (January Week 1)**

Robredo’s leap in the poll is credited to the results of the presidential interviews by the two television network giants in the country: The Jessica Soho Presidential Interviews aired last 22 January and The 2022 Presidential One-on-One Interviews with Boy Abunda that was streamlined from 24 to 28 January. The top five presidential aspirants attended both the interviews except Marcos Jr. who declined the award-winning and veteran journalist Jessica Soho.

New supporters cite that they are now voting for Robredo as she laid clear plans for the country based on knowledge and experience. Her ability to articulate her thoughts in layman’s terms dismantled the elitist image that others ascribed to her. Moreover, the launching of Robredo’s campaign tagline, “Gobyernong Tapat, Angat Buhay Lahat,” in mid-
January consolidated the efforts of her supporters and highlighted how a Robredo presidency, banking on transparency and competence, would be different from the rest of the candidates. The slogan also encapsulates the inclusive and participative administration she employs.

**Most recent VP Vote**

The vice presidential race is much colorful as the presidential candidates, Robredo’s runningmate Kiko Pangilinan (11.77%) is on the third spot following Sara Duterte (49.07%) and Tito Sotto (15.61%) who are the early poll favorites. Sara Duterte’s lead could be due to her being the presidential daughter, while Sotto’s popularity might have been influenced by being the senate president. Willie Ong (10.70%) and Lito Ateinza (1.19%) are fourth and fifth, respectively, while 11.66% are undecided. Nonetheless, Pangilinan’s campaign could be expected to gain traction as the campaign period officially begins on 08 February.

**International Cooperation contra COVID-19**

When asked about the external issues that the next president should prioritize, 52.2% answered that there should be international cooperation against COVID-19. This may be a call for the next administration to present a coherent plan in addressing the pandemic and follow the WHO guidelines and the best practices of other countries (e.g. mass testing and vaccination programs). Other issues include 1) the well-being of OFWs, especially in the Middle East (38.72%); 2) international agreements against climate change and its effects (35.12%); 3) protecting the islands in the West Philippine Sea against China (33.24%), and; 4) upholding democracy and human rights in South East Asia and other regions (27.67%).
External Issues to Pay Attention by the next PH President

The well-being of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW), especially in the Middle East, comes in second place because of the impact OFWs have on the country’s economy. The Middle East also has the largest concentration of OFWs. The third issue is climate change, a crucial aspect of agriculture that constitutes a significant chunk of the country’s labor force. Since climate change cannot be addressed by one country, there is a need to pool resources at the global level to mitigate its effects and assist countries lacking the technology and capacity to do so. In addition, the problem is perceived to be a long-term issue than the previous two points.

While territorial integrity and sovereign rights are two crucial elements of national interest, the fourth and fifth points do not seem to figure in the immediate concerns of the general public. The Filipinos are divided on this concern due to its politicization. Lastly, while a significant portion of the population emphasizes democratic values in the country, their voices are often overshadowed by the wider public’s other pragmatic and immediate concerns. This shows how Filipinos find themselves less connected to the Southeast Asian region. There is also a lack of awareness of the benefits of upholding democratic values as a projected democratic country at the regional and global levels. Notably, most major developmental partners of the Philippines adhere to democratic values and are critical of countries that do not uphold such ideology.

Interpretation of Foreign Policy and Trust in Leadership

The last section of the survey seeks to highlight the foreign policy trajectory of the Philippines through the opinions of the public. It highlights that the public seeks to steer Philippine foreign policy to engage with these top four countries: the United States, Japan, Russia, and China. This addresses the understanding among the Filipinos that the US continues to be the top choice for partnerships and engagements in the political, economic, social, and military domains. Despite the fluctuating level of interaction at the top political level, the general public continues to view the US favorably, mainly as it has effectively provided aid and vaccines to the Filipinos during the pandemic.
It is no surprise that the Japanese have a positive reputation among the Filipinos for their transparent and efficient work ethic, high-quality outcomes, and principles that emphasize mutual respect. Japan is a significant development partner and has allocated considerable resources for the development of the Philippines. Moreover, Filipinos also share similar concerns with the Japanese vis-à-vis the protection of their islands amid powerful forces that seek to alter the status quo.

Despite its limited strategic engagements with the Philippines, Russia is seen positively due to it having no vested territorial interests in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, although China placed fourth, there is a looming mistrust and ambiguity towards it. However, it cannot be dismissed that China has a significant economic clout in the region and is the country's top trading partner. The other four countries (UK, Canada, South Korea, and Australia) have marginal differences in votes. These countries are leading destinations for Filipinos who seek better education, employment, and health opportunities. Hence, engaging with them more effectively may be beneficial in the long run.
In terms of trust in leadership, the survey represents a similar trajectory as with the perception of foreign policy. The US under Joseph Biden, Japan under Fumio Kushida, and Russia under Vladimir Putin maintain their top three posts. Yet, it is interesting that China under Xi Jinping has slipped down to the seventh position. This solidifies that Filipinos view China favorably because of its economic influence and clout over the region. Conversely, trust in leadership is significantly questionable due to President Xi’s bold foreign policy choices in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region.

The next administration could see this as a welcome development as more Filipinos are open to forging ties with other countries. This will not be a problem in a Robredo presidency as she pushed for diplomatic relations. A Japan-based global investment bank also tagged her as more market-friendly and more qualified to handle the post-pandemic recovery of the Philippines compared to the other candidates. It could be expected that Robredo’s brand of leadership and candidacy, which doubles as a movement, would gain credence as the campaign season begins.