

Determinants of The Fear of The Pandemic and Its Effect on Voting Behavior Among Young Adult Filipinos in The Next Presidential Election

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Abstract:

With COVID-19 severely impacting several aspects of society, the upcoming 2022 Philippine Presidential Elections will be the first to take place under such unique circumstances. This study provides information on how various determinants of fear of COVID-19 affect the voting behavior of young adult Filipinos. This study utilized a survey consisting of five sections composed of sociodemographic questionnaire, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, Core Dimensions of Spirituality Questionnaire, Fear of COVID-19 Scale and a question about political participation. The results showed that individuals with a higher level of social support and higher level of spirituality were more likely to conform to the political ideals of their respective environments (i.e. family & religious institutions) and were more likely to participate in the elections, along with individuals with higher levels of fear.

Keywords: Elections, COVID-19, Fear, Spirituality, Sociodemographic Characteristics, Social Support

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INTRODUCTION

The current global pandemic has severely affected society in ways people had not even expected. The rapidly rising number of cases prompted the Philippine government to enact several stages of lockdowns over the past year in an attempt to flatten the curve. As per community quarantine protocols, the public has been discouraged from traveling or leaving their houses unless absolutely necessary (Quieta, 2020). Considering that the presence of the pandemic has affected everyday life, these circumstances are also bound to affect major events, particularly, the administration of the upcoming 2022 Presidential elections.

The Filipino youth have shown themselves to be engaged, critical, and aware of the political scene around them, with some noting their promising potential as political activists (Cabo, 2018). Politicians have taken to marketing their campaigns in commonly used media platforms as the youth are continuously being encouraged to register and vote (De Leon, 2020). Considering this new generation of voters could effectively sway the outcome of the upcoming elections, it is essential to determine the factors that go into voters' decisions, including which candidates they decide to support. The outcome of the aforementioned elections will determine how the country will recover and move forward after being devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Laguardia, 2021).

As per Republic Act 7056, the Philippines shall regularly hold the presidential elections every 6 years, and the process of conducting elections requires voters to physically attend their assigned precinct in order to verify their identities and personally submit their ballots (Tomacruz, 2019). This poses a problem due to the health risks that come with in-person voting. The risk of possible contamination from the virus may cause reduced participation. Generally, the upcoming 2022 Philippine

Presidential and Vice Presidential elections serve as a reminder for qualified voters to exercise their rights, including college students and graduates.

A study in 2014 determined that voting behavior was commonly influenced by factors such as personal responsibility, family and peers, and socioeconomic status, among other things (Pablo et al.). However, due to the pandemic's circumstances, voter behavior may significantly vary, especially taking into account the multiple restrictions in place, such as limited public gatherings and social distancing protocols.

In this regard, this study intends to determine how voter behavior may vary for young adult voters in the Philippines during a global pandemic. Considering that this is the first time a presidential election will be taking place under such circumstances, it would be advantageous to obtain as much data on the event as possible in order to infer and analyze possible outcomes for future reference. Moreover, the majority of research conducted about elections and the pandemic are set in the context of Western countries. The findings and conclusions of those studies cannot effectively be applied for the benefit of the Philippines' situation, thus, data remains inadequate. Additionally, previous studies have not included factors in relation to youth voters and the factors affecting their voting behavior. This study aims to fill in the research gaps of conducting an election during a pandemic in the Philippine setting, as well as take note of the major role that the youth play in the turnout of the elections.

Voting behavior

Voting behavior generally refers to the actions and inactions of citizens, particularly in regard to their participation in a certain electoral event (Rule, 2014). This encompasses various aspects such as their preferred political party, their candidate of choice, or their political views. Natural calamities often

prompt feelings of fear and anxiety within the population, however, the unfamiliar nature of the virus, the resulting social isolation of the pandemic, and the anxieties stemming from information about the virus all highlight and repeatedly cultivate these feelings of fear (Coelho et al., 2020). As per the emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020, the fear of the virus became a notable factor in electoral outcomes, considerably discouraging the population from voting. Certain articles (Noury et al., 2021) suggest that voter behavior changes when in proximity with the virus, as residents fear contracting the virus when going out to vote. Some news articles (Miao, 2020) claim that the pandemic has also introduced additional barriers to voting for young people, though they are not known for turning in votes in great numbers. Although another study (Cabo, 2018) states that despite challenges brought in by the pandemic, young voters are poised to be a decisive force in elections as young voters are more engaged in politics than before. The assessment of some articles (Landman & Splendore, 2020) mentioned that due to numerous risks posed by the pandemic, several elections in states and countries were disrupted. In the last year, several countries including France, Burundi, and South Korea have demonstrated holding their elections amidst the pandemic, making use of COVID-19 safety measures. Due to the challenges and risks that precede holding in-person elections at this time, some of these countries ended up with a low voter turnout, while those countries with a high turnout saw an increase in active COVID cases. As such, a major concern in holding elections under these circumstances is the possibility that several people may forgo participating altogether out of fear of the virus (Maizland, 2020).

Sociodemographic characteristics

Although the pandemic has massively impacted several aspects of society, the effects of it are felt on different levels by people of different sociodemographic characteristics, which refer to various factors surrounding an individual, such as age, sex, social status, and socioeconomic standing (Gesis Lebiniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2019). Typically, individuals who were either aged 40 and above, who lived in areas with more accessible resources, and those who received a higher level of income report feeling higher levels of stress as they cope with current circumstances (Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Fear

Fear cautions us of the presence of risk or the possibility of damage, regardless of whether that peril is physical or mental (Fritscher, 2020). For this study, fear shall refer to the adverse emotions brought about by COVID-19. The response to fear has also been determined by a variety of factors. This can include biological, psychological, and social factors. Biologically, fear can be attributed to the dysregulation of brain chemicals, including norepinephrine and dopamine. In terms of its psychological aspect, fear has been linked to operant conditioning, where feared stimuli can be coupled to specific behavioral responses, including hiding and finding safety. It was also shown that fear could be mitigated by various coping and defense mechanisms. Social factors involved in the mitigation of fear included robust social support and spirituality (Sadock et al., 2015).

Social support

Social Support alludes to the mental and material assets given by an interpersonal organization to help people adapt to pressure (Cherry, 2020). Examples of such include counseling and emotional support from family, friends, and therapists. A study in 2017 indicated that the presence of social support figures reduces fear associations and signals a sense of safety to that individual, which lasts even after the

particular stressor is no longer present (Hornstein & Eisenberg). Specific articles have mentioned that although social support can be estimated from multiple points of view, perceived social support is the most usually estimated form of help. Some studies (Liu et al., 2021) suggest that support from family and friends is helpful against depressive symptoms and PTSD symptoms, as both of them reduce the sense of loneliness. It is also said that social support from friends has a more substantial protective effect against psychological distress than social support from families. Such support can possibly lighten the burden on the depressed population and lower the fears of many struggling during the pandemic.

Spirituality

Spirituality, while often associated with religion, is not necessarily synonymous to it; the concept of spirituality is abstract, however, it has proven to be a coping mechanism for people (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2019). It can be characterized as how people look for and show importance and reason throughout everyday life; how they associate with the occasion, themselves as well as other people, with nature, and corresponding to the hallowed. (Prazeres et al., 2020). A recent study on the relationship between spirituality and fear in the context of COVID-19 indicated that the higher an individual's level of spirituality, the lower the level of fear that an individual feels toward the virus (Durmus & Durar, 2021). An article (Kowalczyk et al., 2020) states that religion has consistently filled the role of salve for the spirit, and customary strict support results in a better, passionate well-being. As COVID-19 cases continue to rise globally, and as researchers & lawmakers struggle to concur with a solution to the economic, social, and health emergency brought by the pandemic, many individuals are looking toward the direction of faith. Religiosity, in addition to spirituality, is also a notable coping mechanism for

stressful situations and mental illness. Although the two are often used interchangeably, religiosity specifically alludes to an individual's conduct and mentalities concerning a particular religion and its standards, qualities, and rehearses and can be estimated by the activities of going to strict sanctuaries, imploring, and perusing holy sacred texts (Prazeres et al., 2020).

METHODS

Research design

This study is an explanatory research focused on determining the relationship between social support, sociodemographic characteristics, spirituality, and fear of COVID-19. Likewise, the study also determined the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and voting behavior among young adults. In doing so, it employed a quantitative cross-sectional methodology through an online survey.

Population

This study focused on young adult Filipinos, of which according to the United Nations (n.d.), considers individuals aged 18 to 30 years old. A total of 135 young adults participated in this study. The researchers utilized convenience sampling as their method in collecting data. In doing so, distribution of the survey was done through online public forums, primarily social media platforms.

Measures

The study utilized an online questionnaire composed of 5 sections. These sections are dedicated to the variables of the study including sociodemographic characteristics, social support, spirituality, fear of COVID-19 and voter behavior.

For the first section, the participants were asked regarding their sociodemographic characteristics. The characteristics which were determined in this study included: age, level of education, sex, marital status, religion, sexual orientation, and household income.

The second section of this study focused on the social support of the participants. For this study, social support was measured in reference to factors relating to the source of the support, namely family, friends, and significant others. It was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, which has shown significant validity and reliability through factor analysis since it produced three-factor solutions for both patient (PG) and student groups (SG), and overall the model demonstrated adequate fit indices (Zimet, et. Al, 2011).

The third part of the study focused on how spirituality affected the participants and their fear. This was measured using The Core Dimensions of Spirituality Questionnaire. A 2011 study gathered participants registered at a marketing research company to answer a 280-item questionnaire which included the Spirituality questionnaire (Hardt, et al., 2011). The researchers of that study confirmed the reliability of the questionnaire, simultaneously noting the comprehensibility of it. It addressed four dimensions of spirituality, namely, belief in God, search for meaning, mindfulness, and feeling of security.

For the fourth part of the study, the researchers determined the level of fear that COVID-19 imposed upon the participants. For this study, fear was measured in reference to the adverse emotions brought about by COVID-19, using the Fear of COVID-19 scale. Participants' level of fear was noted through their agreement or disagreement with the corresponding statements in the scale. The Fear of COVID-19 Scale, a seven-item scale, has robust psychometric properties (Ahorsu et al., 2020). The reliability of this scale was affirmed by a nation-wide survey held in Japan (Midorikawa et al., 2021) of which also took note of the association between sociodemographic factors and fear of COVID-19.

For the fifth part of the study, the relationship between the previously

mentioned variables and how they affect the voting behavior of the participants was determined. This encompassed aspects such as their preferred political party, their candidate of choice, and their political views. This was indicated by a "yes or no" in the following statements: "I am going to participate in the next election.", "I am considering voting for an administration-supported candidate", "I am considering voting for an opposition based candidate", and "I am considering voting for an independent candidate".

Data collection

Initially, this study recruited participants through online invitations from social media platforms, personal social networks, and online public forums. The investigators posted a link to the survey questionnaire on these platforms, as well as personally invited participants through messaging applications.

The data collection period lasted for two months. The data collected from the online survey were encoded in Microsoft Excel, and the online survey questionnaire was closed and deleted shortly after.

Data analysis

Categorical data was summarized using frequencies and percentages, while continuous data was summarized using mean and standard deviation. Afterward, inferential statistics was utilized to determine if there were relationships between fear of COVID-19, voting behavior, level of social support, level of spirituality, and sociodemographic characteristics. Inferential tests that were used included linear regression to determine the relationships between Fear of COVID-19, level of social support, level of spirituality, and the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants; while the Mann Whitney U test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference in the level of Fear of COVID-19 between individuals with different voting behaviors.

Predictors, consisting of the sociodemographic characteristics, levels of social support, and level of spirituality, were analyzed. Beta scores and p-values were analyzed to determine the relationship between the model predictors and level of Fear of COVID-19. Lastly, the Mann Whitney U test was used to determine whether there was a significant relationship between the different voting behaviors and level of COVID-19 fear. A p-value of <.05 was considered as “significant” for this study.

Limitations

Due to the study’s nature being primarily quantitative, there were several limitations to the extent and validity of this study. One such disadvantage was the investigators’ inability to ask for elaboration on the respondents’ answers due to the limitation of the survey. The sampling of the study also compromises generalizability and cannot represent all Filipino young adults. The potential nature of “cause and effect” between factors also could not be determined since the study’s variables were measured simultaneously, and lastly the study does not include nor explore other possible factors that may be relevant to the current variables.

RESULT

Table 1 showed that the average age of the respondents was 20.06 (SD=2.90). Majority of the respondents were females (n=90, 65.70%), at least high school graduate (n=105, 76.6%), single (n=135, 98.54%), Catholic (n=104, 75.90%), and had a monthly household income of less than PHP 10,957 per month (n=80, 58.40%). This income level indicates that most of the respondents came from the lowest income class.

On average, the respondents had scored their social support from their significant other at 20.15 (SD=6.87), family at 20.55 (SD=4.97), and friend at

23.64 (SD=3.99) out of a maximum score of 28 per source of social support. Among the domains of spirituality assessed in this study, the respondents had an average score of 18.46 (SD=5.64) for Belief in God, 20.04 (SD=3.23) for Search for Meaning, 21.55 (SD=2.49) for Mindfulness, and 15.00 the (SD=4.24) for the Feeling of Security out of a maximum score of 25. For the Fear of COVID-19, the respondents reported an average score of 19.15 (SD=6.35) out of a maximum score of 35. Lastly, the majority of the respondents also indicated that they will participate in the elections (n=123, 89.78%).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of sociodemographic characteristics, spirituality, social support, fear of COVID-19, and election participation of the respondents (n=137)

Socio-demographic characteristics	Mean/ Frequency	SD/ %
Age	20.06	2.90
Sex		
Female	90	65.70%
Male	47	34.30%
Education		
No grade completed	0	0.00%
Elementary graduate	0	0.00%
Elementary graduate	1	0.70%
High school undergraduate	32	23.40%
High school graduate	35	25.50%
Post Secondary Undergraduate	10	7.30%
Post Secondary Graduate	5	3.60%
College undergraduate	20	14.60%
College Graduate	31	22.60%
Post Baccalaureate	3	2.20%

Relationship Status			Feeling of Security	15.00	4.24
Single	135	98.54%	Fear of COVID-19	19.15	6.35
Married	2	1.46%	Election Participation		
Religion			will not participate	14	10.22%
Non-Catholic	33	24.10%	Will participate	123	89.78%
Catholic	104	75.90%			
Sexual Orientation					
Non-heterosexual	37	27.00%			
Heterosexual	100	73.00%			
Monthly household income in PHP					
Less than PHP 10,957 per month	80	58.40%			
Between PHP 10,957 - PHP 21,914 per month	9	6.60%			
between PHP 21,914 to 43,828 per month	18	13.10%			
Between PHP 43,828 to PHP 76,699 per month	8	5.80%			
Between PHP 76,699 to PHP 131,484 per month	16	11.70%			
Between PHP 131,484 to PHP 219,140 per month	0	0.00%			
At least PHP 219,140 per month	6	4.40%			
Social support					
Special Someone	20.15	6.87			
Family	20.55	4.97			
Friend	23.64	3.99			
Spirituality					
Belief in God	18.46	5.64			
Search for Meaning	20.04	3.23			
Mindfulness	21.55	2.49			

Differences in sociodemographic characteristics, spirituality, social support, and fear of COVID-19 between respondents who will and will not participate in the election

Table 2 showed that on average, those who would participate in the elections were older in age (mean= 20.14, SD=2.99) and were females (n=82, 91.11%). For educational attainment, it was found that those who only completed elementary education (n=1, 100.00%) and who had post-baccalaureate degrees (n=3, 100.00%) had the highest percentage of election participation compared to other educational attainment levels. In terms of relationships, it was found that those who were married (n=2, 100.00%) had higher election participation than those who were single. For religion, results showed that Catholics (n=98, 94.23%) had higher election participation than non-Catholics, while those who had heterosexual orientation (n=90, 90.00%) had higher election participation than those who were not. Among the income class of respondents, those who had an income of at least PHP 219,140 per month (n=6, 100.0%) had the highest election participation.

Table 2. Chi-square and Mann Whitney U Test of sociodemographic characteristics, spirituality, social support, and fear of COVID-

19 between respondents who will and will not participate in the election

	Will not Participate (n = 14)	Will Participate (n = 123)	X ² /Mann Whitney U Test
	Mean/Frequency	Mean/Frequency	P-value
Sociodemographic characteristics			
Age	19.36	20.14	.494
Sex			.556
Female	8	82	
Male	6	41	
Education			.594
No grade completed	0	0	
Elementary graduate	0	0	
Elementary graduate	0	1	
High school undergraduate	1	31	
High school graduate	6	29	
Post Secondary Undergraduate	1	9	
Post Secondary Graduate	1	4	
College undergraduate	3	17	
College Graduate	2	29	
Post Baccalaureate	0	3	
Relationship Status			1.000
Single	14	121	
Married	0	2	
Religion			.005*
Non-Catholic	8	25	
Catholic	6	98	

Sexual Orientation			1.000
Non-heterosexual	4	33	
Heterosexual	10	90	
Monthly household income in PHP			.752
Less than PHP 10,957 per month	8	72	
Between PHP 10,957 - PHP 21,914 per month	2	7	
between PHP 21,914 to 43,828 per month	1	17	
Between PHP 43,828 to PHP 76,699 per month	1	7	
Between PHP 76,699 to PHP 131,484 per month	2	14	
Between PHP 131,484 to PHP 219140 per month	0	0	
At least PHP 219,140 per month	0	6	
Social support			
Special Someone	17.43	20.46	.137
Family	21.43	20.45	.533
Friend	24.29	23.57	.670
Spirituality			
Belief in God	20.00	18.28	.239
Search for Meaning	19.50	20.11	.415
Mindfulness	20.86	21.63	.250
Feeling of Security	15.57	14.93	.800
Fear of COVID-19	14.21	19.71	.004*

Note: * = p-value <.05

Results also showed that respondents who reported that they

would participate in the election received higher support from their special someone (mean=20.46, SD=6.69) while they had lower support from their family (mean=20.45, SD=5.04) and friends (mean=23.57, SD=4.09). In regards to the domains of spirituality, it was found that those who indicated election participation had lower belief in God (mean=18.28, SD=5.66) and feeling of security (mean=14.93, SD=4.13) while they had higher search for meaning (mean=20.11, SD=3.27) and mindfulness (mean=21.63, SD=2.50). It was also found that those who had higher fear of COVID-19 (n=19.71, SD=6.15) were more likely to participate than those who did not.

However, it is worth mentioning that statistically significant differences were only noted for religion and fear of COVID-19 (p <.05). Thus, it may be assumed that Catholics and those who had higher fear of COVID-19 had a higher likelihood of participating in elections.

Regression model summaries

After determining the significant difference in election participation according to sociodemographic characteristics, level of social support, and spirituality, the investigators utilized a regression model with election participation as the dependent variable. The predictors used were the independent variables found to have significant differences in election participation, namely, religion and fear of COVID-19.

Table 3 showed that the regression model predictors had collective significance in determining the variation of election participation, $\chi^2(2)=17.210$, $p <.001$). The R square of the model can also be used to determine the variance accounted for by the model

predictors. In this regard, this model showed an R square of 0.118 to 0.244. As such, it can be assumed that the variation accounted for by the predictors used to determine the election participation was 11.8% to 24.4% among the respondents.

Table 3. Model Summary

Cox & Snell R ²	Nagelkerke R ²	X ²	df	P-value
.118	.244	17.210	2	<.001*

Note: * = p-value <.05

Effect of religion and fear of COVID-19 on election participation among the respondents

As shown in Table 4, those who have higher fear of COVID-19 have higher odds of election participation (OR=1.164, 95%CI [1.042, 1.299], p .007). Likewise, those who were Catholic (OR=4.909, 95%CI [1.461, 16.499], p .010) have almost five times the odds of election participation than those who were not.

Table 4. Logistic regression of election participation among the respondents

Predictors	Odds Ratio	P-value
Fear of COVID-19	1.164*	.007
Religion		
Non-Catholic	referent	
Catholic	4.909*	.010

Note: * = p-value <.05

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, those who have a high social support system lean more towards participating in elections. Most people conform to their surroundings and their environment; thus, for most families with strong social support, they tend to influence their

fellow members and peers to adopt similar ideology and political beliefs. "Previous research shows that many people vote to stick with the social norm that voting is a civic duty." (Coleman, 2004). Many families with strong social support often implement their beliefs unto their children and peers which makes sense as to why it is completely normal for others to conform to the beliefs of their families.

The study also found that the majority of the respondents would participate in the next election. This may be because many religious groups have recently been active in politics, even endorsing certain candidates like the opposition based presidential candidate, Leni Robredo. "1,400 Catholic bishops, priests and deacons decided to endorse their chosen candidates due to a thorough analysis and study of the characteristics, capabilities, track record of achievements and platforms ." (Barona, 2022). Since 75.9 percent of the respondents were Roman Catholics, the fact that Catholic bishops endorsed the certain candidates had an influence on the voting behavior of the respondents. Previous studies have shown that despite the presence of the separation of church and state, religious groups and figures can still sway the votes of members of their congregation by encouraging them to vote, thus increasing turnout in certain religious groups. According to a study by Lee & Pachon (2007) regarding the voting behavior of Latino voters in terms of their religion: "Latino evangelicals are found to be more-committed supporters of the incumbent Republican president, Donald Trump."

It was also found that those who were Catholic have almost higher odds of election participation than those who

were not. This may be because despite the risks of COVID-19, citizens still look for a leader who can help them get through times like the pandemic and someone who showcases excellency to be responsible for the country. Contrary to previous studies like the one by Chirwa, et. al, (2020) which studied the elections that took place in the country of Malawi and summarizes that due to the voters having a greater fear of COVID-19, they would be less likely to vote. This study shows that the respondents are more willing to participate in the national elections. This may be because they were not pleased with the government's response to the virus, and they would want to participate in order to vote in more competent politicians who could deal with the pandemic better.

CONCLUSION

Generally, this study has shown that contrary to previous foreign studies, fear of COVID-19 motivates people to participate in the elections rather than discourages them. As for the determinants of fear, individuals with a strong social support system were more likely to participate in elections and adopt similar political views to their families. Those with higher spirituality were also more likely to participate in the elections, due to religious organizations recently becoming more vocal on their political stances; the approval of these religious groups toward certain candidates (i.e. opposition-based Leni Robredo) can also sway their members' political views.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reiterates the significance of the upcoming Philippine Presidential Elections, as well as the importance of election participation and the factors

that influence voters' decisions. Since social support and spirituality turned out to be the two factors with the highest significance, the investigators suggest future studies look into further factors that may also affect the participation of individuals who have lower levels of social support and spirituality. The investigators also recommend widening the scope of the study in order to address its limitations, one in particular being the limited number of respondents acquired. Thus, should similar research be conducted in the future, it must be conducted on a wider-scale, preferably including respondents from municipalities and provinces of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. This study was also unable to examine the potential "cause and effect" nature between the factors, thus the investigators also recommend that future studies explore how the determinants of fear affect each other. Furthermore, considering that the results of this study do not necessarily corroborate the findings of previous studies, the investigators suggest that future research look into the contextual basis of why fear of COVID-19 has caused lower voter turnout in other countries but higher voter turnout in the Philippines.

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