

Memo: The 2016 Philippine Election  
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For: Colleagues and peers of Louis Perron  
People interested in winning elections  
From: Dr. Louis Perron

## **Perron Campaigns Election Update: The 2016 Philippine Election**

While the official canvassing is not yet over, everything looks as if Rodrigo Duterte, Mayor from Davao, will be the next Philippine president. During the last weeks, several foreign journalists, who know that I have been observing Philippine elections for the past ten years, have called me. They wanted to know why a plurality of the Filipino voters chose someone who abroad has mostly been known for his provocative comments.

The answer is simple: Mayor Duterte had a crystal clear message which happened to address what voters in surveys consistently mentioned as the number one problems in the country, namely drugs and crime. *It's the message, stupid!* (By the way, it was the same six years ago. PNoy won campaigning in a credible way on a message of anti-corruption, the top issue at the time).

Especially in developing countries, voters are very cynical and highly skeptical of their politicians. Believability therefore is the key. Voters, based on what they know about Duterte's record in Davao and his unapologetic stance on issues, believe that he, unlike others they have heard making promises before, will really do what he says.

The deciding moment of the 2016 presidential election was the second televised debate, or to be more precise, the one-hour live television coverage *before* the debate. While Vice President Binay argued with the host whether or not he could bring his documents, Duterte came across as chill and at ease with himself. He was portrayed as someone who knows who he is, what he stands for and what he offers to the voters. In that sense, the 2016 Philippine presidential election is probably the first election in history that was decided by the pre-debate.

Another factor is the realness and authenticity in Duterte's ads. There were no gimmick, dancing and entertaining, just plain message. My guess is that about a third of the candidates who air ads actually don't know what's in their ads, because for them it's just an ad. More and more voters can feel that, hence the power of realness.

While starting the campaign on a message on 20 dreams for the country, Senator Poe got sidetracked with her citizenship issue. Furthermore, when things got rough, it seemed

to me that Senator Poe went back to the familiar and basically did a re-run of her senatorial campaign from three years ago. In the ads and on the stump, for example, there was a lot of reference to her parents. However, in reality, great campaigns are never a re-run of previous great campaigns.

One of the consequences of this election will also be the continued evaporation of the myth of local machinery for nationwide elections. As a politician friend of mine says: In politics, the only one who cares about you is yourself.

The quickness of the counting has yielded concessions from various candidates. The playbook for a good concession speech is actually simple: the more the loser praises the winner, the more likeable and statesman-like the losing candidate comes across, (despite and in spite of the things he or she has said of the winner previously). While this sounds easy on paper, it is of course emotionally difficult to implement. Observing the various concessions, I think that in all fairness to Former Secretary Roxas, he did the best in this respect.

The 2016 Philippine presidential election has been particularly heated and polarizing. From an institutional point of view, the first past the post – system where one can win the top spot with a plurality of votes seems bound for volatility. A system with a second round run-off between the top two placers, such as in France for example, could add legitimacy to the winner, as one would need to get a majority of the votes.

As for the Senate, I always say that it takes the four Ms to win: message, media, money, and no mistakes. Joel Villanueva's stunning success is a good example for this as he ran on jobs, a message that was both appealing and made credible by the reach TESDA trainings have had in the entire country. In addition to that, my guess is that he probably benefitted from a good organization. Every voter who votes for only one senatorial candidate instead of twelve, gives his favorite an additional edge.

There were also some fascinating and stunning local races. The re-election of Mayor Erap Estrada in Manila will probably enter the history books as one of the biggest comeback stories out there.

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