

POLICY PAPER BY TEAM LAONG LAAN

Establishing a Digital Voting Pilot Program to Enhance Transparency, Accountability, and Efficiency in Philippine Elections

I. THE PROBLEM AND ANALYSIS

As technology evolves, countries must continuously adapt their governance systems to ensure they remain responsive, secure, and inclusive. Elections, as the core mechanism of democratic legitimacy, cannot be exempt from this evolution. The rapid digital transformation seen in finance, public services, education, and communication has reshaped citizen expectations. When electoral institutions fail to keep pace with these developments, outdated processes begin to undermine efficiency, trust, and accessibility. Adapting to technological advancements is therefore not simply a matter of modernization; it is a strategic necessity to maintain transparency, strengthen public confidence, and secure the integrity of democratic processes in an increasingly digital society.

Public confidence in the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) remains fragile (*Public Confidence in the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) Remains Fragile*. - Bing, 2024). Allegations of pre-loaded SD cards, transmission irregularities, restricted access to source code, and opaque vendor-controlled processes continue to surface, shaping public perception whether or not such claims are substantiated. These issues reflect not merely technical gaps but a long-standing deficit in transparency and accountability within the country's electoral infrastructure.

A recent survey shows that the Philippines continues to rank among the top internet-using countries, with the average Filipino spending 8 hours and 52 minutes online daily, well above the global average of 6 hours and 38 minutes (Arasa, 2025). Despite this high level of digital engagement, voters still rely on a traditional, precinct-based system designed for a pre-digital era, which restricts both efficiency and inclusivity.

Operational inefficiencies further reveal the limitations of the current system

- Commission on Elections (COMELEC) **pulled out 311 vote-counting** machines during the 2025 polls because of malfunctions (scanners, screens, ballots/smart cards, thermal printer, USB, etc.). Some precincts — including those designated for “priority voters” (elderly, PWDs, pregnant women) — lacked functioning machines, forcing poll workers to resort to manual handling of ballots. This caused long delays and queue buildup, especially among priority voters.
- A 57-year-old voter who was accompanying his mother-in-law to Bambang Elementary School in Pasig City. He said she struggled to breathe on the way to the polling precinct due to the extreme heat and needed a wheelchair, but staff were struggling to provide one, delaying their chance to vote. During a check at the priority polling place, some **senior citizens expressed frustration over the long wait times**, with some waiting up to an hour
- **Transmission delays** remain a concern: according to a report by a watchdog group, the transmission of election returns (ERs) to stakeholder servers was delayed; despite assurances that

returns would arrive shortly after polls closed, stakeholder servers reportedly received no results until many hours later raising transparency and trust issues.

The persistent fragility of public confidence in COMELEC underscores a structural problem that extends beyond isolated technical failures. Moreover, the operational breakdowns experienced ranging from malfunctioning vote-counting machines to the inadequate accommodation of priority voters—emonstrate how procedural weaknesses directly translate into voter hardship, inequitable access, and mistrust. Combined with delayed transmission of election returns and a long history of opaque vendor-controlled processes, these issues signal an urgent need for systemic modernization anchored in transparency, accountability, and user-centered design. Without comprehensive reforms, confidence in electoral outcomes will remain fragile, and the credibility of democratic processes will continue to erode.

II. PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Digital Voting Pilot Program with Dual Independent Transmission Pathways

A. Overview of the Reform

This policy proposes that COMELEC adopt a **pilot digital voting program exclusively for the Youth/Younger-Voter Share (ages 18–44)**, representing roughly **40–42 million voters**.

The system will allow these voters to cast their votes **using their mobile phones or computers**, similar to secure digital frameworks used in parts of the United States, Estonia, and some U.S. counties for overseas military voting.

Senior citizens and voters with limited technological access shall continue to exercise their right to vote through traditional paper ballots, thereby ensuring inclusivity, accessibility, and convenience for this sector of the electorate.

At present, online voting is restricted solely to Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Under the proposed hybrid system, however, online voting shall be made available to all qualified voters, particularly those who are digitally literate—such as millennials, members of Generation Z, and others who may find online voting more convenient.

This hybrid structure offers several significant advantages:

- **Reduction of congestion in polling places:** By allowing a portion of the electorate to vote online, long queues and overcrowding at precincts can be minimized.
- **Improved service for elderly and persons with disabilities (PWDs):** Those who prefer traditional voting will benefit from shorter lines and more efficient precinct operations.
- **Generation of data-backed evidence:** The system will provide valuable information to assess the feasibility of implementing nationwide digital voting in the future.

- **Enhanced voter convenience:** For those who choose traditional voting, the platform will allow them to access their precinct number and voting records with a single click, eliminating the need to wait in line merely to obtain such information.

In essence, the implementation of this hybrid voting system will streamline the electoral process, uphold inclusivity, and modernize voter participation, while preserving the option of traditional ballots for those who prefer them. Moreover, it demonstrates that we, as Filipinos, are capable of adapting to the demands of the modern era.

B. Core Feature: Dual Transmission System

The most innovative and integrity-enhancing component is the two-channel result delivery:

1. COMELEC Transmission Pathway

Official encrypted data transmitted to COMELEC servers.

2. Independent Commission for Voting Transparency and Audit

A parallel, secure, read-only server operated by:

- academic institutions
- civic technology groups
- professional IT/engineering associations

This **prevents unilateral alteration**, because:

- both sets of results must match
- discrepancies trigger automatic forensic audits
- civil society has continuous access to raw, anonymized data

This innovation directly disrupts the possibility of concealed tampering.

C. Digital Voting Procedure

Step 1: Registration of the Filipino Citizen Pursuant to Article V of the 1987 Philippine Constitution, every qualified Filipino citizen may register through the official digital voting website to exercise their right of suffrage. Registration is the foundational step to establish eligibility.

Step 2: Account Access and Identity Profiling Once duly registered, the citizen may log in to the website. Upon entry, the system requires confirmation of identity through the provision of personal details, including:

- Name
- Address
- Age
- Sex

- Contact Number
- Email Address

Step 3: Verification of Identity The platform then initiates a verification process. The registrant must provide:

- Assigned Identification Number
- Government-issued identification (e.g., PhilSys ID, Voter's ID, Passport)
- Upload of the said identification document for authentication purposes

Step 4: Biometric Authentication To ensure the integrity of the process, the voter is required to log in using biometric verification. This step confirms that the physical identity of the registrant corresponds with the government-issued identification and the personal information previously submitted.

Step 5: Access to Voting Features Upon successful verification, the citizen gains access to the secure features of the digital voting platform. These features enable the voter to cast their ballot and avail themselves of other functionalities necessary for the exercise of their constitutional right.

D. Website Features

The platform will provide the following key functionalities:

1. **Voter History Access** – Users can view the history of national elections for the past three terms, allowing them to track participation and electoral trends.
2. **Precinct Number Retrieval** – In cases where an individual has forgotten or lost their precinct number, this feature enables them to securely retrieve it by logging in with their personal information.
3. **Voting Location Information** – Users will be able to see the exact location where they are assigned to vote, ensuring clarity and convenience on election day.

Integral Feature

- **Partial Voting Statistics** – The system will display real-time partial percentages of voters who have already cast their ballots in a specific locality, alongside the percentage of those who have not yet voted. This transparency helps measure citizen engagement and track whether voter turnout is increasing across successive national elections.

Transparency and Collaboration

Dual Transmission of Results – Partial and unofficial results will be transmitted simultaneously, in collaboration with an Independent Commission for Voting Transparency and Audit.

This commission will consist of:

- **DICT officials**
- **Former COMELEC officials**

- **The Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting**

E. Benefits to Senior Citizens, PWDs and other Filipinos and Precinct Management

Because youth voters shift to online voting:

- senior citizens face shorter lines
- precincts become manageable
- BEIs can provide higher-quality assistance
- election day becomes more orderly and humane

The implementation of this website will make voting significantly easier for all Filipino citizens. It offers a more convenient process compared to the traditional method, eliminating the need for long queues and ensuring a more organized system. With these improvements, it is highly possible that voter turnout in the Philippines will increase, as many of the challenges commonly experienced during elections will be reduced.

F. Legal Basis and Feasibility

1. **1987 Constitution, Art. IX-C**
Gives COMELEC the authority to “*design, implement, and administer a free, orderly, honest, peaceful, and credible election system.*”
2. **COMELEC’s power to adopt new technologies**
has been validated by the Supreme Court (e.g., *Capalla vs. COMELEC*).

III. INNOVATION AND ORIGINALITY

A. First-ever Digital Voting Pilot in Southeast Asia

No ASEAN country has attempted a large-scale, youth-based digital pilot. This positions the Philippines as a regional leader.

B. Dual Transmission Pathway (COMELEC + Independent Commission for Voting Transparency and Audit) This is the most radical addition. It creates *institutionalized transparency* and breaks the monopoly of result verification.

C. Hybrid Model (Digital Youth + Physical Senior Voting)

A balanced design:

- modern enough for youth
- accessible for elderly
- efficient for COMELEC

D. Structural Reduction of Political Dynasties

Digital voting:

- lowers barriers to entry for new, younger candidates
- weakens local kingpins relying on patronage and precinct influence
- increases youth independent voting behavior
- makes vote buying riskier (no guarantee of how the voter voted)

Over time, this leads to **natural erosion of dynastic dominance**.

E. Cost Reduction and Environmental Sustainability

- reduced printing of ballots
- lower logistical costs
- reduced machine rental and maintenance costs
- fewer ballot boxes and transport needs

This framework is not merely a set of policies but a commitment to building a governance system that is *inclusive, transparent, and citizen-centered*. It rejects approaches that marginalize the poor or vulnerable, and instead affirms that every Filipino—regardless of status, age, or ability—has a rightful place in shaping our collective future. By embedding transparency at every stage and fostering genuine citizen engagement, we create a democracy that listens, adapts, and empowers. This is not about imposing reforms from above, but about co-creating solutions with the people, ensuring that modernization never comes at the cost of accessibility or dignity. Ultimately, the success of this framework lies in its ability to make good governance: to make institutions not distant or intimidating, but responsive, participatory, and reflective of the nation’s diverse voices. In this way, we move forward with a system that honors a traditional way while embracing progress—one that truly embodies inclusivity, fairness, transparency, and trust.

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