



THE DESIGN OF OUR **DEMOCRACY**

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The questions you ask limit the answers you can come up with.

Michele Tepper | FrogDesign

A lot of time has been spent (and probably will be spent) on debating the merits of a unicameral vs. a bicameral legislature, of a parliamentary vs. presidential system. I know the legal luminaries, the experts on public governance and political science have weighed in on the project along with a thousand pundits and bloggers so I've avoided putting in a comment. What I haven't seen though is the problem tackled by a design mindset.

The designer looks at both users and end results and then traces the dynamic back to driving forces that move the users and shape the results. The designer looks at the dynamic not the rationales and rethinks the dynamic to leverage the driving forces. The designer begins by asking the right questions and understanding how the system operates (in its current form) before positing possible solutions. The design approach is agnostic and amoral in its analysis while producing ethical and forthright solutions.

This monograph tackles the question of the design of democracy in our country.

Parliamentary or presidential? Unicameral or bicameral? I think the debates miss the problem entirely. Whatever form of government we choose (or not choose) the essential problem we face is corruption at the polls -and the successive doubt and distrust of both the results and the government-elect. No subsequent Philippine state will achieve legitimacy until we remove the cloud of doubt that hangs over our electoral process.

The doubt is built on two factors. One is the suspicion of corruption —of rigging the polls and wholesale vote buying.

The other is the seeming dearth of worthy candidates from which to choose our leaders. As Willy Priles opined in his blog (nagueno.blogspot.com), we seem to be forced to select from among the dregs that the parties serve up for national posts. The two major flavors the parties seem to be intent on foisting are ex-media personalities or scions of established politicians. Both trade on name recognition. The former from extensive media exposure, the latter from news familiarity and name recall.

You can change the form of state any which way you want but until we address this two-pronged doubt, all successive governments will be (in the best case scenario) treated with benign distrust or assailed with questions of legitimacy.

The quick answer is to reform the comelec. Build integrity into the agency charged with safeguarding the elections

and people will trust electoral results. That's why we've been trying to automate the elections. But computerization and a trustworthy Comelec is at best a partial answer. Computerized systems can also be rigged and hacked. And even the most highly regarded officials can have their integrity swiftboated. All a spinmeister need do is to create doubt to start the public sliding along the slippery slope to distrust, while media feeds the conflagration by playing on the he said/she said conflict.

Computerization and a even a total overhaul of the COMELEC will not even begin to tackle the question of serving up and selecting would-be leaders nor will it sever the dynamic that warps the system; its roots in nepotism and media manipulation.

The solution must go deeper. We have to look at the dynamics driving the electoral problems and look at the processes driving the selection of candidates.

I see three driving forces that are interconnected:

1. **The strong positive feedback loop** -power begets power. power is a barrier to entry.
2. **The power of filters and information agglomerators** -modern popular elections have 50M voters selecting leaders they will probably never meet in person so the game belongs to the marketers and image keepers. Campaigns are not about governance but about attacking and defending brands.
3. **The relative cost-per-vote in very large elections** -which makes votes more expensive by bulk but cheaper by the unit. (Here, I use "cost" in an amoral sense.) When selecting a mayor, each vote can be as cheap as 1/1,500,000 per unit (which is the ratio of 1 vote vs. the total number of would be voters). Selecting a senator or a president prices the unit at 1/50,000,000.

I will tackle each of these driving forces in the succeeding pages and prototype some possible design approaches to mitigate the effects or even find solutions.

We intrinsically understand that this **accumulation of power**, this positive feedback gain, is a threat to our democratic ideals

The Positive Feedback Gain

Let's talk about the positive feedback gain and how it is impossible decouple this from the accumulation of power. A few guideposts before we proceed:

1. I use "positive" in a systemic sense, so I use the term in an amoral dimension. The feedback is "positive" only in that it encourages or amplifies the effect. (If we were talking about sound then "positive feedback" would mean feedback that intensifies the volume.) I do not mean that imparts positive values.
2. I will use the term "cost of each vote" (or "cost per unit" of votes) also without judgement. Cost can mean the actual price of buying a vote (corruption) or the cost of acquiring a voter, or the per capita cost of an electoral campaign (legitimate campaign costs) .
3. Likewise, I use "resources" (which I will interchange with "power") in an amoral sense -it could mean money, or means, or social connections, or political networks, or electoral machinery.

The positive feedback gain (which is also a "loop") works this way:

- *getting elected allows a politician to accumulate power and "resources" (and by that I mean either political power, or wealth, or access to or control of actual physical resources, or access to or control of social networks or political organizations).*
- *These resources gives the politician or her scions a comparative advantage in the next elections.*

The feedback is "positive" in that accumulating more resources gives the politician an even stronger comparative advantage. It is also a "loop" because, successive terms also amplify both the resources and the comparative advantage of the politician.

We intrinsically understand that this accumulation of power, this positive feedback gain, is a threat to our democratic ideals. Democracy assumes a level playing field and we'd like to imagine that every candidate should stand for election (or re-election) on the merits of their worth as leaders. They should not gain undue advantage because their current position gave them access to resources and power that they can leverage in the next electoral contest.

(I am personally ambivalent about re-electing incumbents. I think good leaders should get re-elected if they are to continue the good programs they have started.)

We have tried to decouple the positive feedback gain from the power of an elected official mostly by regulation or legislation. We have tried:

- * **Imposing term limits** -because we understand that the longer a politician stays in power, the more resources he accumulates.
 - * **Monitoring their wealth** by requiring the yearly submission of Statements of Assets and Liabilities (SALs) -because it allows us to guard against the suspicious rapid accumulation of wealth. We regard wealth as a placeholder for an elected official's accumulated power.
 - * **Outlawing nepotism** -to prevent incumbents from strengthening their hold on power via close-in connections in key positions. This is our way of trying to sever the inter-generational "loop" portion of the feedback gain. So, too, our next approach which is:
 - * **Proposing an anti-dynasty bill** -to prevent incumbents from extending their hold on power by using their scions as their patsies and by leveraging their existing power to get their patsies elected.
- (NOTE: I think the congress will never pass this law as it is patently against their own self-interest.)

By and large, these attempts have failed because political power begets power and by default gives the elected official access to government and extra-government resources.

It is almost impossible to draw the line between the exercise of legitimate political power and the destructive leveraging of influence. Being in office alone gives the incumbent an advantage over any pretenders as the office gives the incumbent more visibility. (More visibility = higher name recall.) Being elected gives you an advantage because it raises your public profile and makes you more familiar to the voters.

We also have to admit that the power we bestow on elected officials is inherent in the job. That's why we elect them in the first place, to give them the political power to produce results for the electorate. They need the power to get things done. The last thing we want is an impotent office and yet it is very difficult to draw a strict line do between

the execution of office and the leveraging resources to get re-elected (although we have hundreds of lines in our legal books that attempt to do just this).

Example: *When an incumbent senator visits a province to consult with the citizens in-aid of legislation, does this opportunity for glad handing not give him a comparative advantage the next time those citizens come to the ballot?*

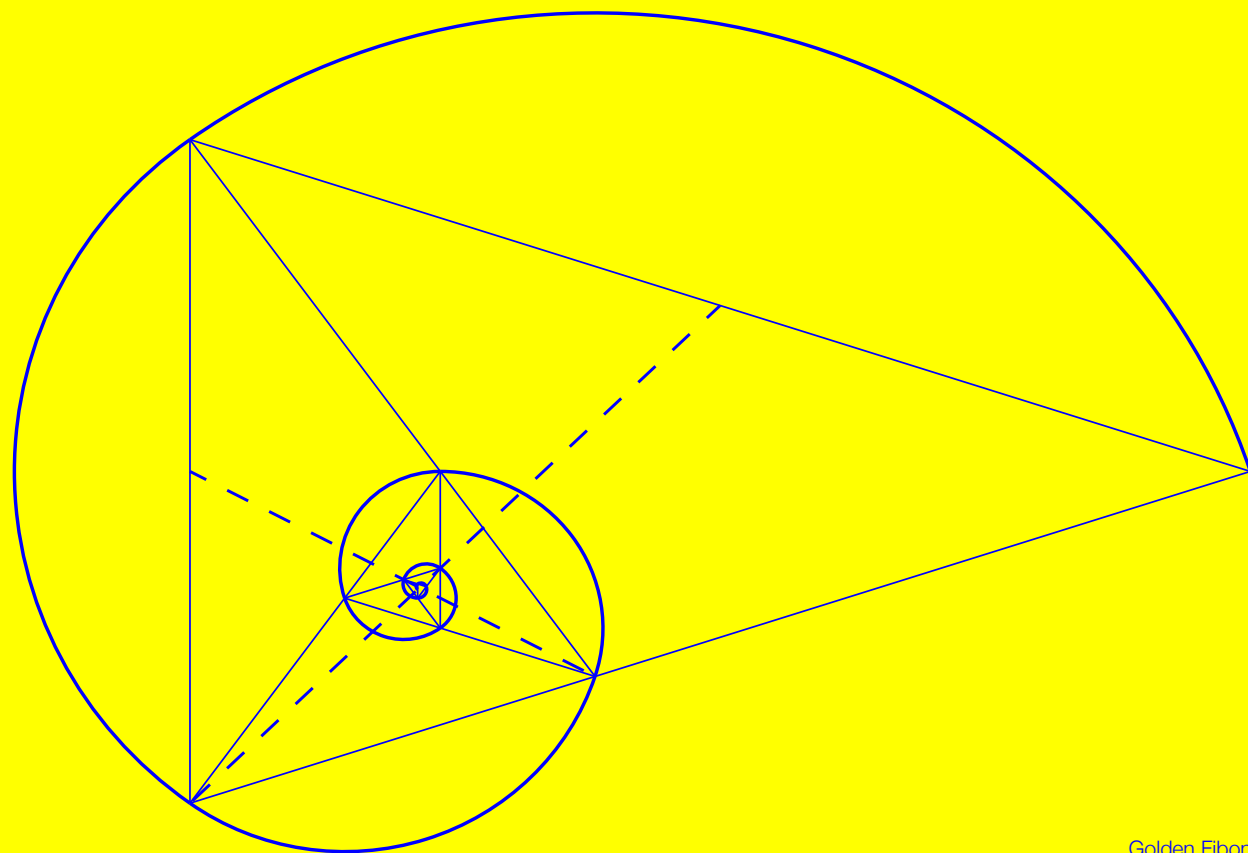
The best we have come up with is a rule that prevents the use of public resources 90 days before an election. But, like the example above, campaigning to get re-elected can come in many subtle (read: totally legitimate) forms and can begin even before the campaign period actually starts.

(In its most basic form, this is what the pork barrel is all about. The CDF and special insertions in the budget, allow the incumbents to “invest in their brand” and sell themselves to the electorate ahead of the elections. Hence the preponderance of large billboards attributing credit to the proponents of CDF funded projects. --Building political networks are also part of this early investment of resources.)

Clearly,our attempts to legislate a decoupling of the elected office from power as an advantage, have been largely ineffectual.The positive feedback gain is so inherent in the power of an elected office that incumbents are more likely to get re-elected, no matter how terrible their legislative (or executive) record.Their children are also more likely to be elected to their position -or to other political position. (Past electoral counts will bear this out and this is true not only in the Philippines but in almost all representative democracies.)

Apart from giving incumbents an undue advantage, the positive feedback gain has also raised the barriers to entry to elected positions. New entrants to the political game (no matter how able their leadership track record) must either bring in comparative resources vs their opponents or invest ahead in name recall so as to gain a comparable competitive position to the incumbent. (Which is why celebrities are such good fodder for candidates -they come built in with popularity -i.e., they are already a “brand” that the voters recognize and can stand their ground in the battle for name recall.)

We have also tried to regulate away this increasing costly barrier to entry (a side effect of the positive feedback gain) as another attempt to level the political playing field.



Golden Fibonacci Triangle

Barriers to Entry

We have tried to regulate away the positive feedback gain and have failed simply because it is impossible to decouple elected office from the accumulation of power. If the accumulation of power cannot be decoupled from elective office, then this accumulated power becomes a high barrier to entry for would be challengers.

Our democratic ideals say our candidates should be competing for votes based on the ideas they propose (their electoral platform) and their leadership track record (or the level of trust the public places on them).The reality though is that today’s media soaked culture rewards high media exposure with high name recall -giving the advantage to candidates who get in the news often (be it political or entertainment news).

Incumbents have the advantage of a high profile job that gives them natural exposure in the news media.This is wholly part of the positive feedback gain. This media exposure along with access to social and political networks presents a high barrier to entry that would be challengers must overcome if they are to be on competitive footing against incumbents.

How do we compute the relative cost of this barrier? What toll does it put on our electoral system?

Investments and pre-investments

Running for an elective position requires resources. The higher the post, the more the resources are needed to get elected to the position. If you are running for president, you are competing for 30M-35M votes, and depending on the size of the field (number of candidates) will need to garner somewhere in the region of 12M to 17M votes.To get elected to the Senate, you will need to garner at least 12M votes.To get elected to the House of Representatives requires anywhere from 25,000 to 200,000 votes (depending on the district) .

You can monetize these voter numbers to see the cost of a campaign (i.e. $P1 = \text{voter}$, then you will need $P12M$ minimum to campaign for the senate). This is, at least in theory, relatively easy to do during the actual campaign period.We know of course that campaigning to get elected begins way before the official campaign period and so incumbent politicians who want to get re-elected will devote resources in advance of elections.This is where the comparative advantage - given by the positive feedback gain -comes in.

When the incumbent gets a CDF outlay for her district (and plasters her name all over the project), when she appears in public to give speeches or cut an inaugural ribbon, when she donates to community events, when she appears in the news, or when she glad hands local leaders -she is “pre-investing” resources in getting re-elected. She is also building name recall.

Likewise, a new candidate “invests” in brand creation and name recall when they elevate their public profile (via TV shows, or movies, or appearances in local fiestas, or being cited in the news) so as to get name recall.

Unlike funds spent on a campaign, the pre-campaign “investment” in name recall is nearly impossible to monetize. We need to find a way to measure the relative effect of these investments to see their effect on electoral contests.

Cost of voter acquisition: c as a function of v and r

We can attribute a **per unit cost (c) to acquiring a voter** (i.e. -getting a vote) by expressing it as **the ratio of total votes needed (v) vs. total resources expended (r)**, such that:

$$v/r=c$$

The cost of acquisition c , expressed as a per unit cost, allows us to compute the relative advantage of investing more vs. less resources in an electoral campaign. You can view it as the relative marginal cost of acquiring another vote or the relative “friction” of the system against a candidate. (The lower the number, the lower the marginal cost or the less the friction.)

We can use this relative unit c to grasp how high the barrier to entry is. It also allows us to illustrate the system dynamic.

Figure 1 shows that in a electoral contest over 50 million votes, investing **12M** more units gives a candidate a relative advantage of **-46c** vs. a candidate expending **1M** units. In other words, the marginal acquisition cost of another voter is **4c** units for a candidate spending **13M**, while it is **50c** units for a candidate spending only **1M** units.

The system dynamic means that (at least in large populations) a higher r gives you a lower c .

An incumbent, with 4 to 6 years of media exposure along with access to resources and social and political resources, has easily invested huge amounts of r giving him a lower c . The longer an incumbent stays in office, the more r is naturally invested in making c lower.

The system dynamic drives new candidates to expend a similar magnitude of resources to achieve a competitive c . It also means that only persons who already have a high r have any chance of being considered as candidates. (We know this instinctively and we recognize “dark horse bets” and celebrate the unlikely success of “cinderella” candidates.)

The logic of getting celebrities to run for public office makes total sense given this system dynamic. Because celebrities come with built-in media exposure (read: pre-investment” -not to mention a strong “brand” based on their media typecast), a popular celebrity would have already expended high volumes of r which gives the celebrity a lower c .

FIGURE 1
Computing the Relative Acquisition Cost Per Voter

$$v/r=c$$

v		r		c
total voters	vs.	units of resources		relative acquisition cost per unit
		1,000,000		50
		2,000,000		25
		3,000,000		17
50,000,000	/	5,000,000	=	10
		8,000,000		6
		13,000,000		4

Our democracy was designed for a much smaller population. It did not foresee elections with millions of voters.

Numerator and Denominator

This is the key equation: $v/r=c$.

The numerator (v) is the number of voters. The denominator (r) is the amount of resources a candidate has invested into getting (re)elected. The quotient (c) is the acquisition cost per voter. (OK, for the math purists, we can call them dividend and divisor.)

Jay W. Forrester, the founder of *System Dynamics* (which deals with the simulation of interactions between objects in dynamic systems) used to say that, "people know intuitively where the leverage points are in a system -and that a lot of attention is put on pushing that leverage point, but often in the wrong direction."

Our electoral system is no exception. We know that overaccumulations of r is detrimental to our system. Our ideal is that candidates stand and are judged on the basis of their ideas or proposals. The reality is they get elected based on name recall and on meticulously crafted media images.

We have thrown regulation after rule after law to try to corral r -trying to limit it by imposing ceilings on campaign expenses, or trying to balance it by providing government subsidies. We try to wrestle the positive feedback gain so that it doesn't become an advantage. In design terms, we have spent the better part of our energy trying to collar this factor using external controls.

Acting on r -the denominator - is pushing in the wrong direction. What we have not considered is the numerator. We have not considered the size of v nor have we considered managing v to moderate r .

Think about it: our democracy, as all other democracies, was designed for a much smaller population. (Athenian democracy ran at the city level.) It did not foresee elections with millions of voters nor did it contemplate the power of the mass media.

If anything, we have let v get away without any controls whatsoever. We delineate v not based on population size -but on geography. It doesn't matter whether one district has triple the number of voters of another district, they still both get one representative. The geographic boundaries are totally arbitrary. The district outlines are artificial and have no grounding on population flows.

We ignore the effects of the size of v in our system to our detriment.

Compare the relative effect of spending P1M vs. P13M on a campaign with a universe of 50M votes. The cost of acquisition per voter (c) for the candidate spending P1M is 50c -while it is only 4c for the candidate spending P13M —a cost difference of 46c.

But what if $v=2,500$? The difference in c between a candidate who spent P62,500 vs. a candidate who spent P8M is 0.0397 -- that is to say, almost negligible!

Our work should be on the numerator -and the size of the denominator will almost be insignificant. Work on the size of the voting population and the amount of resources one candidate will have (how much name recall they have or how big their political/social network is) will probably not matter.

A large v marginalizes
the effect of each
individual vote and
**gives power to
the middle men**

The Size of the Electorate

The standard market paradigm we have for elections is that candidates are the sellers and the voters are the buyers. Our ideal is that candidates-as-sellers try to get the voters-as-buyers to choose them based on “sellable qualities” —that is: their ideas (electoral platforms and promises), reputation and track record as leaders. What the voters are buying is a promise of good government or good leadership. In essence, the candidates signal the quality of their product through their campaign communications.

This is well and good but it assumes that voters-as-buyers have direct information about the sellers. The market paradigm encounters problems in elections that involve a large electorate (v). The size of v creates problems of *information asymmetry*, particularly in modern societies. Where the candidates and campaigns are armed to the teeth with polling data and sample tested communication strategies, the voter must rely on second-hand information (often, not even from third-party reports) about the candidate. When the voting population reaches into the hundred thousands and into the millions, all information is second hand, filtered by media and by image managers.

With an electorate size of 50M, the candidate will have to appear to 2 crowds of more than 250K each for everyday of the 90 day campaign period just to make sure every voter sees them in the flesh. Clearly, that is unrealistic.

I contend that the information asymmetry inherent in the system is so one-sided that what we essentially have is a *market failure*. Moreso, the information asymmetry actually reverses the relationship to *candidates-as-buyers and voters-as-suppliers*. (Caveat, I am not an economist.)

In contests involving large electorates, the game belongs to the candidate who can assemble the majority (or plurality). The candidate is, in effect, buying votes in bulk volume, while the voter produces a single widget —their vote.

The campaigns basically say “*sell your widget to me, I will give you the best value for your widget.*”

From the voter’s perspective (the widget maker) the promised payment is better government (or actual financial payoff) if he *sells* to the right bulk buyer

Because the market is so large, there is a need for middle-men whose job is to aggregate the produce —to assemble the needed volumes of widgets for the buyers who will only buy in bulk. Hence the power of the media, and the campaign professionals and the message shapers and the spinmeisters. They, in essence, aggregate the singular widgets into a majority (or plurality) vote. The vast majority of the widget makers will never meet the bulk buyer in person (they may see them in real life at a large rally) but their selection will be based on the pitch given by the various layers of aggregators (the middle men).

The malignant side of this condition (the need for aggregators) is vote cheating by volume (i.e., *dagdag-bawas*).

The one act given to the widget maker —making a choice between buyers —is further clouded by our synchronized electoral system that makes them choose in a single go: a president; a veep; twelve senators; a congressman; a provincial governor; several councillors; a mayor; several city or town councillors; and, etc.

A large v marginalizes the effect of each individual vote, inverts the economic relationship, and gives power to the middle men. It also necessitates a more complex electoral machine. The large v requires multiple layers of counting, multiple layers of safeguards —scaling in complexity the larger the size of the electorate gets.

Most people make
the mistake of thinking design
is what it looks like.
That's not what we think design is.
Design is how it works.

Steve Jobs

Signal, Noise, Oligopsonies

Large electorates basically cause a market

failure in the economic transaction paradigm of democratic elections. The information asymmetry inherent in reaching a large electorate causes a market failure by reversing the transactional role of the candidate and the voter. The candidate becomes the buyer in the equation, the voter is the supplier. The kink in the system is that the buyer buys only in bulk, and this shifts the power to the aggregators who can deliver or assemble the required number of votes.

The role of the aggregator can take the relatively "benign" form of the spinmeisters and message shapers or the media. It can also take the more malignant incarnation of the dagdag-bawas comelec mafias.

The small number of bulk buyers (candidates) relative to the large number of suppliers (voters) characterizes an **oligopsony**.

The information asymmetry in the system is basically a **signal vs. noise** problem. The large electorate prevents direct one-to-one communication (symmetrical) between candidate and voter. To reach as large an audience as possible (to sway as many voters), the candidate's message must be amplified through various channels. Inherent in any amplification is distortion, noise and filtering. The fidelity of the signal is further compromised by the adversarial nature of elections. Attack ads, *dis-* and *mis-* information campaigns increase the noise in the system apart from the cacophony of multiple messages from multiple sources. Again, both the candidate and the voter (more so the voter) cede power and control of the communication (and subsequent transaction) to the media channels.

(Some may argue that new media –the internet –may correct some of that information asymmetry. The Net does undercut the role of traditional media but current technology only really adds to the noise, requiring even more work for the voter to extract the signal.)

How we solve the problem? *Well, how does one solve a) oligopsonies and how does one b) reduce noise in the system?*

Oligopsonies

1. **You can try to regulate an oligopsony** so as to cut the power of the buyers and aggregators.
2. **Or, you can act break up the market.** In an oligopsony, the suppliers (voters) have less power because very large majorities (or pluralities) are required to win elections. (Each vote is further diluted by the number of posts a voter must fill up on the ballot.) Breaking the market almost always means atomizing the market –breaking it up into smaller pieces so there are smaller markets with less candidates vying for the vote of a smaller electorate. (No, this is not an argument for federalism. I am talking about the *size* of the markets, not the *form* of the governance.)

We've tried the first option –regulation –as evinced by the myriad rules governing our electoral campaigns. Regulation requires enforcement and apart from our weak enforcement, it is also true (as I've said before) that a system that requires external enforcement to work is essentially an ineffectively designed system.

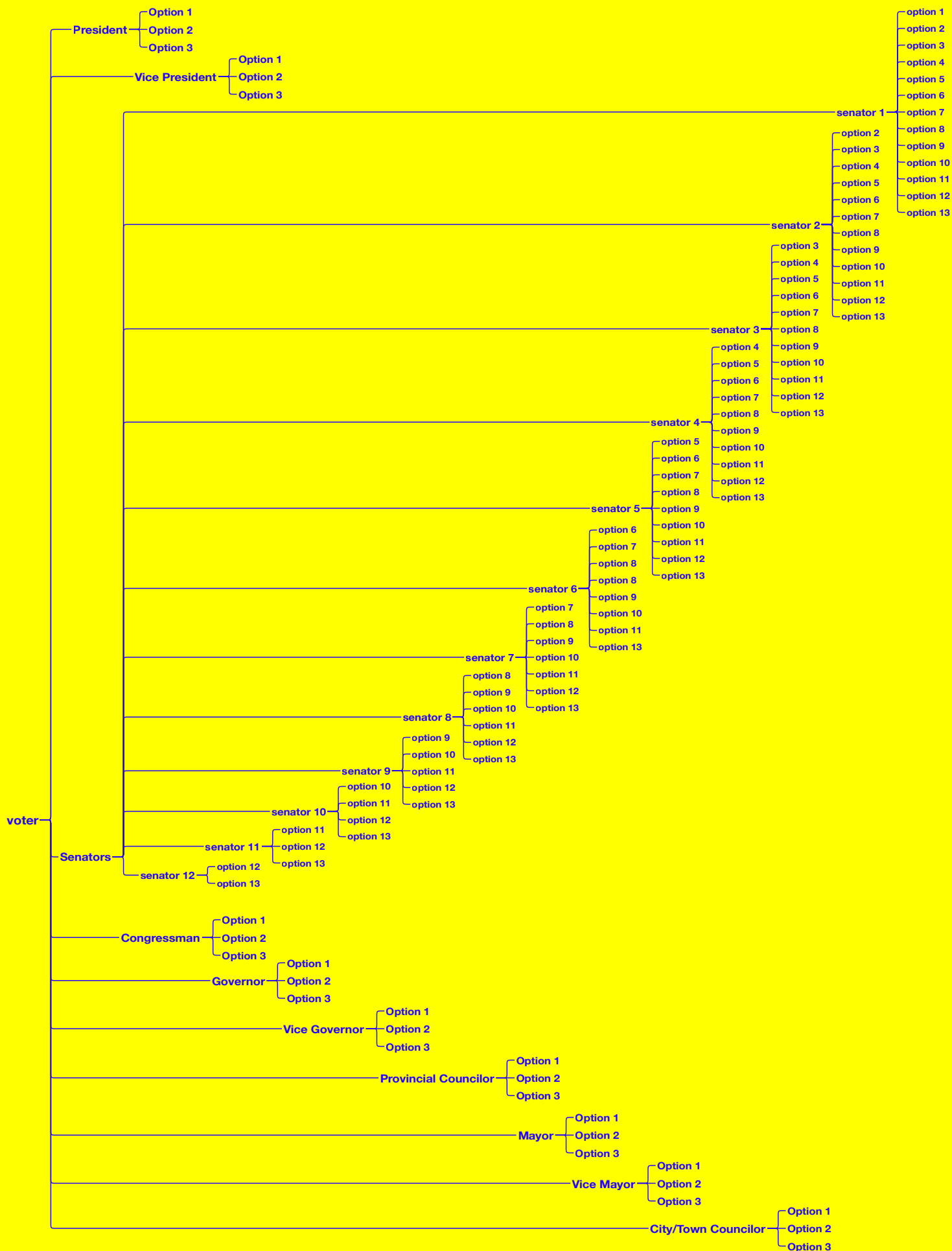
What we haven't tried to do is to break up the market.

Signal-to-Noise

1. **You can insure the fidelity in the system by increasing the signal and reducing the noise** to get a better signal-to-noise ratio. You can try to do that by brute (technical) force by designing a system that checks for fidelity and corrects for deviations from the signal at multiple points. Systems that do this require more energy and more complexity. (The more complex a system, the higher the potential for failure.) Also, the stronger the amplification (i.e. -media to reach 50M voters) the more energy you need to ensure the fidelity of the signal.
2. **You can also spend energy to make a more sophisticated receptor** that can internally filter noise from the signal.
3. **Or, you can cut the distance between the signal emitter and the receptor**, reducing the need for amplification and lowering the incidence of noise.

Again, in this case, we've tried the first two options –hoping independent media can insure the fidelity of the signal (by checking for bias), or educating voters hoping to turn them into more sophisticated receptors.

What we haven't tried to do is to cut the distance between the emitter and receptor.



The Voter's Decision Tree

My contention is that our political troubles –the dearth of worthy candidates, the corruption in the system –are direct products of the current design of our electoral system: of the nuts and bolts of the process; of the mechanisms that guide how it works.

The system is biased towards unworthy candidates. The system engenders power brokerage and corruption. The system itself frustrates the desires of the electorate.

I've already discussed the power of the positive feedback gain, the barriers to entry, the effects of a large electorate, and how our current process of selecting and electing political leaders can be modeled as a market failure (oligopsony) or a signal processing failure.

Let me offer one more way to think the problem, one more way to view the problems of the existing system, before I go on to a possible design solution.

Think about the elections as a decision tree that confronts a citizen, during the campaign and in the voting booth.

The illustration on the opposite page shows the structure of the decision tree. Our synchronized elections demands that the user make 20 decisions multiplied by as many options that run as candidates.

Any system that depends on a decision tree this complex and expect it at a single decision point is bound to fail. The structure of the tree not only confuses the decision-maker but also cheapens the value of each of the 20 decisions.

The decision tree offers choices but really no credible information about the choices at the point of selection. We expect the user to make sense of all the choices.

One might argue that that is the primary task of citizenship: to make an informed choice but the complexity of the tree inherently frustrates any possibility of a fully-informed choice.

The problem is four-fold:

- 1) we ask the user to make too many choices from too many options;
- 2) we don't provide clear criteria for the selection;
- 3) the user likely has very little direct information (first hand experience) about the options presented; and,
- 4) there is delayed feedback on the effect of the choices (if there is any feedback at all).

To design an effective system, you would need to address three key criteria:

- *limiting the choices the system demands from the user*
- *providing direct information and criteria to the user about the choices*
- *insuring direct feedback to the user on the effect of the choices*

An effective system would meet the three criteria and also address the two issues I outlined at the start of this series. Issues that I believe lie at the heart of the matter.

We want a system that allows us to:

- select good leaders; and
- prevents corruption (or the suspicion thereof).

Addressing the two issues would be the goal of the new system design - the key criteria would be the guiding principles of the new system design.

Echoing the previous explorations, the new system should also:

- 1) reduce the barriers to entry;**
- 2) preserve the value of each vote while negating the effect of a large electorate;**
- 3) remove the power of the intermediaries and aggregators;**
- 4) break up the oligopsony; and finally,**
- 5) eliminate the noise in the system.**

Would you rather:
a) Have the power to select who can be considered for leadership?
b) Have the power to select leaders from a pool of choices prepared by someone else?

A New Design for Democracy

Would you rather accept the constraint of choosing our national leaders exclusively from a pool of candidates selected by political cliques with vested interests, or would you rather give up the prerogative of voting for the leaders directly if you could instead select who should be considered for that pool?

The design change I am proposing is in essence a mechanism shift. I propose that rather than electing leaders at the national (or even regional level), we should select leaders at the superlocal level (the barangay) and these leaders then become part of the pool of candidates from which the system selects municipal, provincial and national leaders.

The mechanism shift, that of holding direct elections only at the barangay level, will reduce the size of the electorate (v), reduce the cost of acquiring votes (c), lower the barriers to entry, and eliminate the role of the middle-men. (More of the benefits later.)

How it works

Citizens in all barangays will select their nine (9) barangay councilors. The candidate who garners the most votes becomes the chairperson of the barangay. This superlocal elections affords direct contact and direct information to the voters about the candidates.

From there, the selection of the upper levels of government proceeds by 4 levels:

1. Each barangay sends its chairperson as their representative to a district council (which can be based on the existing congressional districts or adjusted to better distribute the population).
2. Each district council (composed of all the chairpersons from all the barangays in the district) elects from among their ranks: a) the congressional representative, and b) six (6) other representatives to represent the district in the city/town council.

(The district council also serves as the consultative administrative body for that geographic area.)

3. Each city or town council elects, from among their ranks, the Mayor and the Vice Mayor. They also select six more individuals to represent the town or city in the provincial council. If the district (level 2) is not in a town or city, their six reps move up directly to the provincial council.

Meanwhile, your congress representative joins the house of representatives, and the house, selects from among its ranks 26 individuals who will serve as either senators or the president and vice president.

4. The provincial council will select from its ranks the Governor and Vice Governor of the province.

There are two ways to approach the Level 4 at the national stage:

- a) the top vote getters in the 26 elected from the house automatically become President and Vice President of the country; or,
- b) the 26 meet and select the prexy and the veep from among themselves.

Benefits

As complicated as the system sounds, this design actually has built-in simplicity that reduces the need for external controls.

Simple vote counts

The design removes the complexity required from the electoral counting system by simply reducing the scale of the number of votes that must be counted to determine a winner.

The largest electorate is the barangay. Ideally this should be no more than 3,000 voters. This electorate is so manageable that you could actually ask school children to do the electoral counts. (What a great way to teach citizenship!)

Because there is no need to aggregate the electoral results, you reduce the required vigilance. (No chance for wholesale cheating of at the various levels of tabulations required by our current system.)

The next levels of the election (district, provincial, congressional) are so small –perhaps 300-400 voters –that, again, the electoral count becomes ridiculously manageable. You could do a show of hands.

Each count at each level would take only hours. Even if you allow for travel times between the levels (to get the representatives together), the whole process could be finished in a week.

Low barriers to entry, no feedback loop

It reduces the barriers of entry as your barangay chairperson, indeed any one who runs for a barangay post, could potentially be elected to any municipal, provincial, congressional or even national post.

It also takes the power of money out of the system. You don't need to spend millions to get elected to the barangay level. And if you try to buy your neighbors, the electorate is small enough that another candidate (also a neighbor) could probably match your expenses.

The next level, with 300-400 voters is an even smaller pool. A system design that drives up the cost of each vote, further.

Easier choices, direct information

It simplifies the choice of the voter, they only have to vote for 9 people, all of whom are their neighbors.

There will be no need for sophisticated (and expensive) mass media campaigns. No room for image management. No fancy poster can override a bad reputation in your neighborhood. What would be required would be one-to-one communications. Word of mouth, the amount of trust your immediate neighbors have in you, will be the currency.

Can you imagine any of the more notorious national or local candidates actually getting elected by their neighbors in this setup? The abusive scions of the traditional politicians would never make the cut to office if any of the people who lived next to them had a say in the process. That breaks the generational positive feedback loop.

Distributes political power

The system also negates the role of the geographic distribution of wealth in our national politics and distributes representation based on the size of the economic class. The rich folk in La Vista or Forbes or Alabang would have to run against each other. The gated communities will have one or two representatives to the district council –with equal voting power with the representative from Payatas, or Pag-asa or from any middle class community. Since there are more poor and middle class barangays, there will likely be more representatives from these classes.

In the long run, this will force the dispersal of the power and wealth elite.

Eliminates middle-men

Because the electoral counts are in such manageable sizes, there is no need for a huge electoral bureaucracy. There is no space for an electoral mafia that can traffic in the aggregation of votes.

There is very little spinmeistering that can be done when you are dealing with physical neighbors. If barangays are limited to a population size of 2,500-3,000, that would mean that every voter is at most 2-degrees separated from the actual candidate. (You would at least know a person who personally knows the candidate). This reduces the signal to noise ratio and cuts the distance between the candidate and the voter.

The national media will have no real role or influence whatsoever. How do you report on horse races in 72,000 barangays?

There will be no room for media darlings. No currency for national name recall.

Would you vote for your actor neighbor? Rich actors would likely be living in wealthy neighborhoods where they'll have to compete with their kapitbahay bankers, lawyers and doctors.

Atomizing, and preserving the power of the electorate

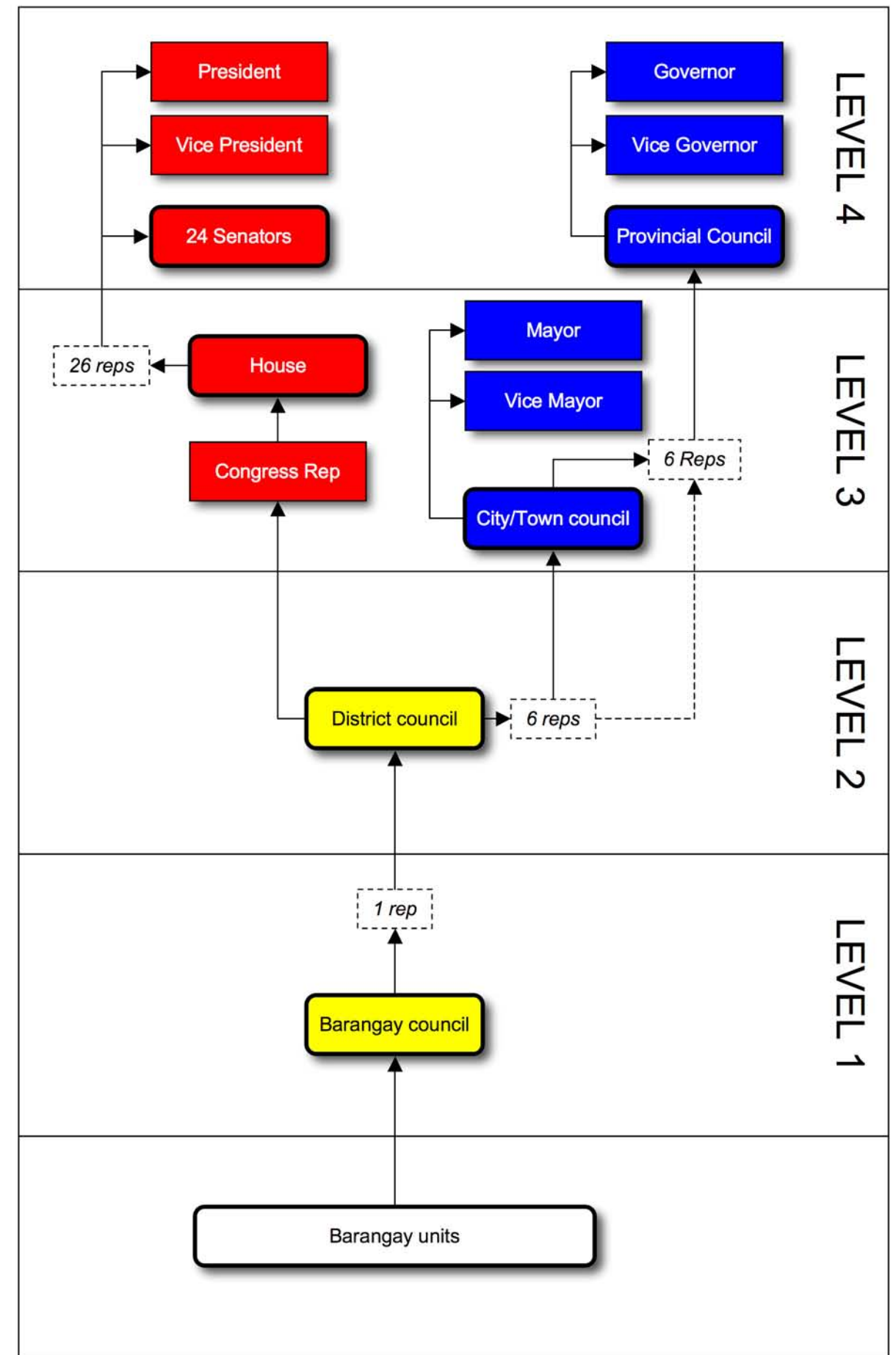
This system is counter-intuitive. Even if voters don't get to directly vote for the national leaders, the design actually preserves the power of each vote relative to another. It increases the marginal value of each additional vote. The worth of each vote is 1/2,500 vs. the 1/50M that we have now.

You also preserve the power of the voter in the barangay level. The driving force to get re-elected becomes your reputation among your direct neighbors who are close enough to see any conspicuous consumption borne of illegally accumulated wealth.

Fail the original 2,500 voters and they will deny you the chance of even getting to the district level the next time around. Large billboards claiming credit for pork barrel projects will not help if your barangay is dissatisfied with your performance.

I would prefer, in fact, that all the national, provincial and municipal officers keep their responsibilities as chairmen of their barangay.

Imagine the impact of announcing the entrance of "Juana de la Cruz, President of the Republic of the Philippines and Chairperson of Bgy. 2868 in Manila."



We cannot hope to resolve our current political issues unless we **rethink** the actual design of the electoral system

A Change in Paradigm

The problems that currently plague our democracy have their roots in the functional and mechanical arrangement of our electoral system –in the nuts and bolts of how we select candidates and how we vote.

You may, like Willy Priles, diagnose the problem as one a pool of inferior choices; or you may, like Manolo Quezon, consider it a question of diminished leadership. My contention is that both are products of the same system dynamic. We cannot hope to resolve the current issues unless we rethink the actual design of the electoral system.

The more I consider it, the more I become convinced that our commitment to selecting national leaders through a national election –where one person gets one vote –is based on nothing else but romantic idealism.

There is no literature, no study, no scientific proof that argues that completely popular elections produce significantly better leadership.

Our collective myth is that would-be leaders who step up to the platform of candidacy got there by their own merit and by exemplary and proven performance. We'd like to think that our democratic system encourages only the best of the best to stand for elections.

In truth, our leaders get elected mostly on the basis of name recall and largely on the power of the resources (monies, fame, networks) they bring to the campaign.

Meeting the criteria

This new design effectively breaks the positive feedback gain, eliminates the information asymmetry (and the market failure) and reduces the signal to noise ratio.

It returns the value of the individual vote - by reducing the size of v and brings the voter closer to the candidate.

In my last post in this series, I listed three key criteria that an effective electoral system needs to address.

Does this design meet the criteria?

1. Limiting the choices the system demands from the user

Yes. Because the voter only chooses 9 people, all from whom they have only 2 degrees of separation.

2. Providing direct information and criteria to the user about the choices

Yes. The voter will have at worst, secondhand information -but it will not have come through a sophisticated media sieve.

3. Insuring direct feedback to the user on the effect of the choices

Yes. If the chairperson fails in his role as leader of the barangay (i.e. -addressing the needs of his neighborhood), then he will not get re-elected by his barangay even if he made it all the way to the presidency.

Parting Shots

I have yet to conceptualize how this new design would work at the fullest scale but I did not want to be sidetracked with the possible logistical issues and the practicability of getting this system enacted. (We need to make sure that barangays are only 2,500-3,000 in size. Some of our current divisions allow for populations of 50,000 in a single barangay.)

Will this work? I don't know. One thing is sure, our current system isn't working and no new thought has been put into how it can be designed to be more effective. All the noise and fury is about the quality of our candidates or the corruption of our politics. No one has thought of the mechanics of the actual system.

I hope you treat this idea with Edward De Bono's *PO*. I present it as a conversation starter and, hopefully, a point of departure for further exploration and innovative thinking.



About the Author

Benjamin de la Peña is an urban planner who was born and raised (and lived most of his life) in Metro Manila.

Prior to obtaining his advanced degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, he ran a national youth leadership program for outstanding student leaders in the Philippines.

Benjamin writes on the net as **Urbano dela Cruz** via **Another Hundred Years Hence** (hundredyearshence.blogspot.com) where the articles in this monograph first appeared as a series of posts on the design of democracy. (c. Aug. 2006 to May 2007).

He currently lives in Washington, D.C. with his wife, Vickie, their son Teo, and their two cats, Moxie and Tipper.