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ECONOMICS OVER
POLITICS: :
**GUT ISSUES
PREVAIL AMID
ELECTION NOISE**

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ECONOMICS OVER POLITICS: GUT ISSUES PREVAIL AMID ELECTION NOISE

With the arrest of former President Rodrigo Duterte and his swift handover to the International Criminal Court, as well as the looming impeachment trial of his daughter Vice President Sara Duterte, it is clear that the so-called UniTeam of the 2022 elections has disintegrated, creating deep fissures among those in government identified with each political camp, and their supporters.

Arrested upon his return to Manila on March 11, 2025, the former President awaits trial in The Hague in the Netherlands for crimes against humanity. Meanwhile, the House of Representatives impeached the Vice President on February 5 on charges of conspiracy to assassinate President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., First Lady Liza Araneta-Marcos, and House Speaker Martin Romualdez, the misuse of PHP612.5 million in confidential funds during her tenure as Vice President and Department of Education secretary, and failure to disclose her Statement of Assets, Liabilities, and Net Worth (SALN), among others.

These developments serve as the backdrop of the May 12, 2025 midterm elections, where some 68 million registered Filipino voters are expected to elect leaders for various posts on the national and local levels of government.

There are over 18,000 positions to be filled in the executive and legislative branches. These include vacancies for 12 senators, 254 district representatives, 63 party-list representatives, and local executive posts such as governors, mayors, vice mayors, provincial board members, and city/municipal councilors. The campaign for national positions began on February 11, while campaigning for local positions started on March 28.

Amid the political noise, however, Filipinos consider economic and social issues as their top concerns. In fact, despite encouraging official statistics on inflation, people feel that government efforts are inadequate at least in terms of containing the prices of goods. On the positive side, they also note that select social welfare programs have been helpful in their plight.

Survey respondents have identified advocacies that candidates should take up in order to gain their support. Among these job opportunities, food security, health care, education, workers' rights and welfare, poverty and hunger, climate change and disaster preparedness, prices of goods and services, defense of national security and sovereignty, energy security, and the usage of renewable energy.

Amid greater reliance on social media as a source of news, voters must increasingly be informed to evaluate candidates based on the issues they stand for. This includes helping them shun disinformation and prevent political noise and other distractions, and fake news from influencing voter behavior. This will also allow them to sift through the political noise and focus on listening to candidates' tangible plans and advocacies, going beyond mere rhetoric.

The surveys amplify the challenge to government leaders and candidates, institute measures fostering transparency and accountability, and focus on initiatives that would help uplift the lives of Filipinos economically.

This paper embarks on the following objectives: (1) providing a background of the political and economic situation in the Philippines before the midterm elections; (2) pulsing the public sentiment on various issues based on survey findings — their most urgent concerns, the advocacies that they think candidates must have, how they regard social welfare programs, and where they obtain their news and information, among others; (3) offering insights and strategic recommendations so that policymakers and candidates can address governance and economic challenges.

Philippine Politics and the Economy at the Current Juncture

On March 11, 2025, the Philippine Center on Transnational Crime, assisted by the Philippine National Police, implemented an Interpol Notice for the arrest of former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. The International Criminal Court had issued a warrant for Duterte's arrest on charges of crimes against humanity.

"The Chamber finds that there was a course of conduct involving the commission of multiple acts against the civilian population on the territory of the Philippines," read part of the warrant.¹

"The Chamber finds reasonable grounds to believe that, in his role as head of the Davao Death Squad and subsequently

the President of the Philippines, Mr. Duterte used the direct perpetrators of the crimes as tools to commit the crimes."

The warrant also stated that the arrest of the former president is necessary to ensure his appearance before the Court.

After being held in Villamor Air Base for the most part of the day, former President Duterte was flown to the Netherlands to await trial at the detention facility of the ICC in The Hague.

A month earlier, on February 5, the House of Representatives impeached Vice President Sara Duterte based on the following grounds: (1) Culpable Violation of the Constitution; (2) Betrayal of Public Trust; (3) Graft and Corruption; and (4) Other High Crimes. Violations include contracting an assassin to kill President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., First Lady Liza Araneta Marcos, and House Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez; misuse and malversation of public funds; inciting to sedition and rebellion; large-scale corruption; and allowing extra judicial killings to continue during her term as Davao City Mayor.²

After initially announcing that her impeachment means nothing to her, the Vice President filed a petition before the Supreme Court to stop the impeachment proceedings, claiming it is constitutionally infirm. The petition is pending even as she has now gone to the Netherlands to help attend to her father's legal needs.

Meanwhile, Senate President Francis Escudero has repeatedly declared that the Upper House, which is set to try Duterte, is not in any hurry to begin the hearings until after the Congress resumes its session in June. There is an ongoing debate, however, on how soon the impeachment proceedings should begin, given the word "forthwith" mentioned in the Constitution. Senator Escudero said the Senate would not give in to any pressure to hold the trial sooner.

These developments are manifestations of the open animosity in the UniTeam — the tandem between President Marcos Jr. and Vice President Duterte — which won the 2022 elections. This rift supposedly began sometime in late 2023 when controversy over Vice President Duterte's confidential and intelligence funds started to intensify.

In the March 9, 2025 gathering in Hong Kong, the last public appearance of the former president two days before his arrest, Vice President Duterte shared the stage with her father and thanked the audience for their support. She asked for their continued backing in 2028 — even as she immediately backtracked and said it was a joke.³

If she is convicted of the articles of impeachment during her Senate trial, Vice President Duterte will be removed from office and will be perpetually banned from seeking public office.

FEATURES

ON THE COVER

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Prof. Manhit founded the Stratbase Group in 2004 and has provided top-level strategic analysis and thought leadership on global issues in the Philippines. He identified investment and business opportunities, gathered critical intelligence to overcome regulatory challenges, and developed deep relationships in key departments and agencies. As a public policy analyst and strategist, Prof. Manhit thinks beyond politics for his political risk assessments, and draws on a combination of backward-looking, fact-based, data-driven analytics with forward-looking thinking, and strategic policy options. He believes that policy research and analysis should be undertaken in an independent, strategic, and pragmatic manner in order to contribute to the geopolitical debate and, in the process, effectively influence domestic and regional policy. He has provided strategic analysis at this time of great global challenges and the importance of the influence of a globalized society in nation-states.

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POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY AT THE CURRENT JUNCTURE

Former President Rodrigo Duterte and Vice President Sara Duterte were respectively arrested and impeached in March 2025. The political environment is volatile as country prepares for the May 2025 midterm elections amid growing concerns on inflation and increasing the pay of workers

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ADVOCACIES OF CANDIDATES

Filipino voters prioritize candidates who advocate for increasing job opportunities, food security, healthcare, education, and workers' rights, among other economic and social issues.

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EFFECT AND IMPACT OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS

Filipinos generally view social welfare programs like 4Ps, TUPAD, and AKAP as beneficial in alleviating their economic struggles. However, transparency and accountability in the implementation of these programs are essential to ensure they serve their intended purpose and do not advance personal interests.



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ISSUES OF NATIONAL SECURITY

Filipinos overwhelmingly support candidates who defend national security and sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea, with 83% favoring such advocacies. A Pulse Asia survey revealed that 68% of respondents would not support pro-China candidates in the upcoming elections, reflecting growing mistrust due to China's aggressive actions



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DISINFORMATION AS AN ISSUE OF SECURITY AND DEMOCRACY

With 78% of Filipinos using the internet, particularly social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube, as a primary news source, the risk of disinformation is significant. A Social Weather Stations survey found that 59% of Filipinos view fake news on the internet as a serious problem, highlighting the need for enhanced media literacy to combat misinformation

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advocacies of candidates

Against this backdrop, the Philippines is gearing up for the May 12 elections, where 68 million voters will choose a fresh set of leaders for a three-year mandate. Some 18,000 positions are expected to be filled, including vacancies for 12 senators, 254 district representatives, 63 party-list representatives, and local executive posts such as governors, vice governors, provincial board members, mayors, vice mayors, and city/municipal, councilors.⁴

The campaign period for those seeking national positions began on February 11, while campaigning for local posts started on March 28.⁵

The political noise, however, appears to remain secondary to the more pressing economic issues that concern Filipinos. They are closely monitoring the prices of goods and are evaluating the current administration of President Marcos Jr. in terms of managing the rise in prices. Political controversies notwithstanding, there is a clamor for issue-based campaigning as evidenced by the range of issues deemed important by survey respondents.

There appears to be a disconnect, however. Inflation has been steady in recent months, according to official numbers. The Philippine Statistics Authority reported that the inflation rate of 2.9% in January 2025 decreased further to 2.1% in February 2025. The inflation rate was at 3.4% in February 2024.

Finance Secretary Ralph G. Recto said this was “a win for lower income households.” The government’s target range for inflation is between 2% and 4%.⁶

Despite these figures, public sentiment indicates otherwise. Surveys conducted by reputable polling firms indicate that amid and despite the political noise, the national concerns deemed most urgent by Filipinos are economic in nature.

For example, a February 2025 Pulse Asia survey commissioned by the Stratbase Group found that 73% of Filipinos consider controlling inflation their top concern, while 32% are focused on increasing the pay of workers.⁷

The survey asked 2,400 respondents to select up to three issues that the Marcos Jr. administration should urgently address. Fighting criminality ranked third at 30%, fighting graft, theft, and corruption in government ranked fourth at 27%, an decrease of two points from January 2024, while creating more jobs remained a concern for 24%.

Most Urgent National Concerns: Philippines

January and February 2025
in Percent / Multiple Response, up to 3 allowed

Figure 1



PulseAsia
RESEARCH INC.

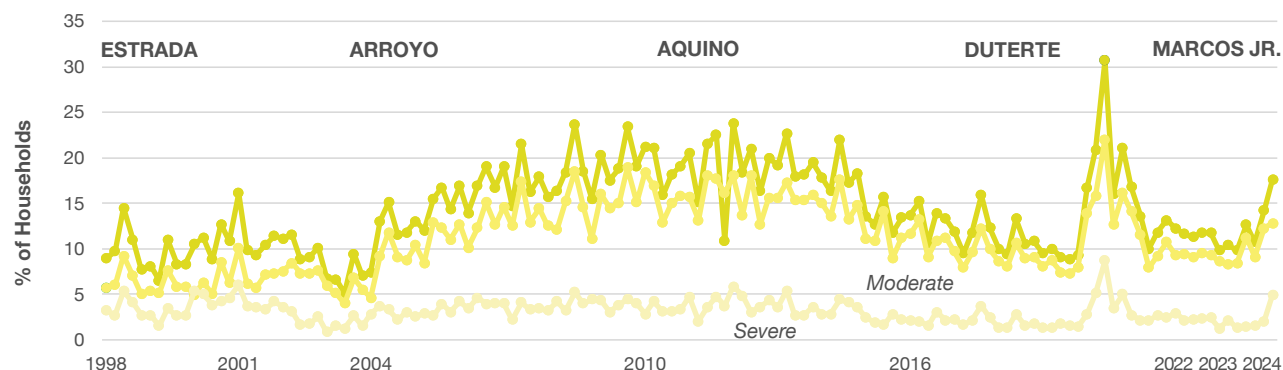
Base: Total Interviews										
NATIONAL CONCERNS			RP	LOCATION				CLASS		
				NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
Controlling Inflation	PB	Feb '25	73	84	69	73	77	69	73	78
	PB	Jan '25	70	61	69	74	75	54	72	76
		Change*	+3	+23	0	-1	+2	+15	+1	+2
Increasing the pay of workers	PB	Feb '25	32	35	31	40	25	33	32	26
	PB	Jan '25	33	44	31	40	25	24	34	36
		Change*	-1	-9	0	0	0	+9	-2	-9
Fighting criminality	PB	Feb '25	30	25	22	22	54	33	29	39
	PB	Jan '25	23	21	19	27	27	22	22	25
		Change*	+7	+4	+3	-5	+27	+11	+7	+14
Fighting graft, theft, and corruption in government	PB	Feb '25	27	25	31	25	21	30	27	20
	PB	Jan '25	29	24	34	24	26	38	29	21
		Change*	-2	+1	-3	+1	-5	-8	-2	-1
Reducing the poverty of many Filipinos	PB	Feb '25	24	22	26	25	21	33	22	34
	PB	Jan '25	24	27	23	21	26	34	22	31
		Change*	0	-5	+3	+4	-5	-1	0	+3
Creating more jobs	PB	Feb '25	24	31	25	22	19	17	24	22
	PB	Jan '25	27	17	30	32	22	19	29	23
		Change*	-3	+14	-5	-10	-3	-2	-5	-1

Q. Sa mga sumusunod na isyung pambansa, pakisabi ang hanggang tatlong isyung dapat aksyunan agad ng administrasyon ni Presidente Ferdinand "Bongbong" R. Marcos, Jr. Maaari kayong magbanggit ng iba pang wala sa listahan. Alin po ang unang isyung dapat aksyunan agad ng kasalukuyang administrasyon? Ang pangalawa? Ang pangatlo? Notes: (1) *Change = Figures of Pulso ng Bayan (PB) February 2025 minus Figures of Pulso ng Bayan (PB) January 2025. (2) Base for Pulso ng Bayan (PB) January and February 2025 = Those who are likely voters and those who cannot say if they will vote or not in the May 2025 elections.

Total, Moderate, And Severe Hunger: Philippines

Jul 1998-Dec 2024
Face-to-face Interview

Figure 2



SOCIAL WEATHER STATIONS Founded 1985
Statistics for Advocacy

Fourth Quarter 2024 Social Weather Report
2024 National Survey

Q: In the last 3 months, did it happen even once that your family experienced hunger and not have anything to eat? [Moderate: Only once + A few times: Severe: Often + Always Note: Don't Know and Refused responses are not shown. All points connected by broken lines are from mobile phone surveys. Face-to-face interviewing resumed in November 2020.

In December 2024, 26% of Filipino families reported increasing involuntary hunger. This means that they endured without food at least once in the preceding three months. This figure marked a three-point increase from September 2024 and was the highest since the record high of 30.7% during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020.

With food prices continuing to rise, it is no surprise that many Filipinos still feel trapped by the burden of inflation.

People are most conscious of the increase in the price of rice. A Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey, conducted in the same month in partnership with the Stratbase Group, found that Filipinos felt that rice prices had risen the most among food items. Some 59% of the 1,800 respondents said that rice prices increased the most between October and December 2024. The rest of the respondents cited other food items: 25% cited meat (chicken, pork, beef), 11% cited vegetables, and 4% cited fish and seafood.

Despite government assurances of price stability, public sentiment tells a different story. Filipinos believe that the government’s efforts to rein in inflation are insufficient. The same SWS survey found that 58% of Filipinos believe the Marcos Jr. administration’s measures to control inflation are insufficient. Only 16% consider them sufficient, while 19% remain neutral.

Because much of the public’s satisfaction with government’s performance is linked to the prices of goods, it follows that perceived difficulty in meeting daily

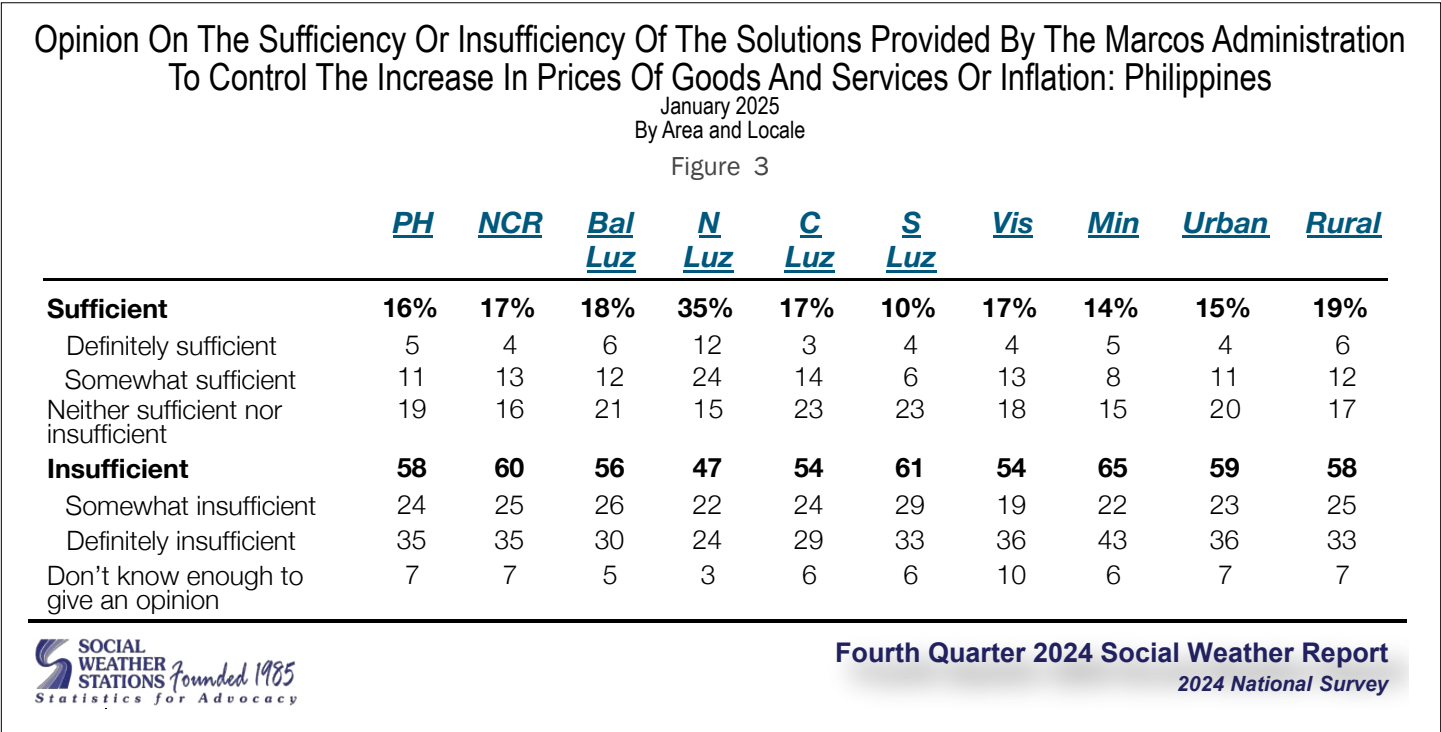
needs because of rising prices would affect people’s trust in the administration.

Predictably, the same SWS survey reveals that the percentage of respondents with “much trust” in President Marcos Jr. has been dropping. This indicator has been consistently going down from 64% in July 2024, 57% in September 2024, 54% in December 2024, to 50% in January 2025.

Advocacies of Candidates

Contrary to the usual notion that Filipinos vote on mere name recall and personality, the January 2025 SWS survey showed a range of issues that concern Filipino voters, and that they will vote for candidates advocating for these concerns.

The concerns are predominantly in the fields of economics and social services. Topping the list, as cited by 94% of respondents, are increasing job opportunities and the



Issues Or Advocacies That Would Make One Vote For A Candidate: Philippines

January 2025

Figure 4

	<u>Vote for</u>	<u>Not vote for</u>	<u>No effect</u>
Increasing job opportunities	94%	3%	3%
Development of agriculture and ensuring food security	94	2	4
Strengthening of the health care system	93	3	3
Equal access to education	92	4	3
Workers' rights and OFW welfare	92	4	4
Reducing the poverty and hunger of Filipinos	87	6	5
Addressing the impacts of climate change and enhancing disaster preparedness	87	5	6
Controlling the prices of basic services and goods	85	8	6
Defending national security and sovereignty in the West Philippines Sea	83	7	8
Achievement of energy security and the usage of renewable energy	82	7	8
Fighting illegal drugs	79	14	5
Electoral reform and technological modernization of elections	79	10	9
Eradicating graft and corruption in government	70	21	7
Enactment into law against political dynasty	59	25	12
Enactment into law of divorce for couples who have already separated and cannot reconcile	50	35	12
Enactment into law the legal use of marijuana for people with serious illness	35	52	11
Enactment into law the legalization of the civil union of members of LGBTQ+	34	49	15
Enactment into law the legalization of abortion for women who are victims of rape or incest	22	69	7

development of agriculture and ensuring food security.

Other top issues include the strengthening of the health care system (93%), equal access to education (92%), workers' rights and OFW welfare (92%), reducing the poverty and hunger of Filipinos (87%), addressing the impact of climate change and enhancing disaster preparedness (87%), controlling the prices of basic services and goods (85%), defending national security and sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea (83%), and the achievement of energy security and the usage of renewable energy (82%).

Jobs and human capital. People will always be concerned about having the means to take care of their own needs. Thus, the level of employment, underemployment, and unemployment is an important indicator. According to the PSA, the country's unemployment rate remained at 3.1% in December 2024, unchanged from December 2023, but slightly lower than the 3.2% recorded in November 2024.

The number of unemployed individuals in December 2024 reached 1.63 million, lower than the number of unemployed persons recorded in the previous month at 1.6 million. The December 2024 unemployment figure,

however, is slightly higher than the 1.60 million the previous December.

Food security. Because it is the most basic of needs, the government must focus on ensuring a stable food supply to all areas in the country. Without food security, public health, peace and order, and overall economic development will be compromised.

To ensure food security, the government must enhance investments in local agricultural production so that people can have access to nutritious and affordable food items. The agriculture and fisheries sectors must be viable for

farmers, fisherfolk, and all value chain stakeholders alike.

Social services. Finally, there must be continuous investments in the delivery of social services like health and education. Economic growth and even technological advancement would be meaningless if government services cannot reach those who need them most, and people’s quality of life does not show any improvement.

Health and education, among others, are fundamental to sustained economic growth and social stability. Additionally, 87% of Filipinos expressed support for efforts to reduce poverty and hunger, as well as address the impacts of climate change, which highlight the importance of environmental and climate policies. These are the emerging major electoral issues, with voters increasingly recognizing the need for disaster preparedness and sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, 85% prefer candidates who can effectively

control the prices of basic goods and services, underscoring the need for policies to be both fiscally responsible and sensitive to the economic realities faced by ordinary Filipinos.

Effect and Impact of Social Welfare Programs

Among the top three social welfare programs in the Philippines are the 4Ps, TUPAD, and AKAP.

The *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps) is a human development initiative of the national government that provides conditional cash grants to the poorest of the poor, aiming to improve the health, nutrition, and the education of children aged 0-18.⁸

Meanwhile, the Department of Labor and Employment established the *Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers* (TUPAD). This is a community-based program designed to offer temporary

employment to those adversely affected by the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and other crisis situations.⁹

This project is focused on assisting the underemployed, self-employed, and displaced marginalized workers who have found themselves without a source of income due to unforeseen circumstances. Aside from providing these individuals with financial support through temporary jobs, it seeks to uphold their dignity by engaging them in meaningful community service and improvement projects.

Lastly, *Ayuda sa Kapos ang Kita Program* (AKAP) provides financial aid to minimum wage earners falling under the low-income category, who are severely affected by rising inflation. The main legal basis of AKAP is the General Appropriations Act of 2024, which authorized the funding for the program. Qualified here are

Awareness Of Selected Government Social Welfare Programs And Opinion On Their Helpfulness To Underprivileged Filipinos: Philippines

January 2025
Figure 5

Base: Those Aware Of Government Social Welfare Programs							
	<u>Aware</u>	<u>Not Aware</u>	<u>Very helpful</u>	<u>Somewhat helpful</u>	<u>Somewhat not helpful</u>	<u>Not at all helpful</u>	<u>Don't know enough</u>
Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino program (4Ps)	93%	7%	66%	24%	5%	4%	--
Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers (TUPAD)	84	16	51	37	7	5	--
Ayuda sa Kapos ang Kita Program (AKAP)	70	30	42	39	10	9	--
Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS)	34	66	42	38	12	8	--
Walang Gutom Program (WGP) formerly known as the Food Stamp Program	32	68	48	33	12	7	--

individuals who belong to low-income category, i.e. those whose income does not exceed the statutory minimum wage.¹⁰

Filipinos' reception of social welfare programs like the three mentioned above have been generally more favorable than their perception of the government's anti-inflation measures. Majority acknowledge the benefits brought by the programs.

A Stratbase Group-commissioned SWS survey conducted among 1,800 respondents in January 2025, inquired whether people were aware of these programs and whether they found these helpful. According to the survey, 93% of respondents were aware of 4Ps, 84% were aware of TUPAD, and 70% were aware of AKAP. Other programs mentioned were the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS) with 34% and *Walang Gutom Program* (formerly Food Stamp Program) at 32%.

A majority of respondents also said that the 4Ps was "very helpful" (66%). Twenty-four percent said it is "somewhat helpful," 5% said it is "somewhat not helpful," while 4% said it is "not at all helpful."

Meanwhile, 51% of those surveyed believe TUPAD is "very helpful." Some 37% believe it is "somewhat helpful," while 7% and 5% believe it is "somehow not helpful" or "not at all helpful," respectively.

Around 30% of respondents still were not aware of AKAP at the time of the survey. Nonetheless, 42% of respondents believe that AKAP is "very helpful" while 39% believe it is "somewhat helpful."

Pulse Asia conducted a similar survey in the same month, with 2,400 respondents. The results hew closely to the SWS findings: Pulse Asia found that 82% of Filipinos believe 4Ps improves the financial stability of lower-income households, while 82% also said TUPAD supports overall well-being by providing jobs and livelihood. Meanwhile, 81% recognized AKAP as helpful in ensuring financial stability for lower-income families.

Based on these surveys, the government's social welfare programs have indeed helped make a dent in alleviating the daily economic struggles of Filipinos. They have enabled families to meet their basic needs, which would not be possible if they merely relied on their existing jobs or on the government's anti-inflation measures. As Filipino families feel empowered by these programs, they also contribute to boosting local socio-economic activities.

The *ayuda* programs of the government could be depicted as a way for incumbent politicians to curry favor among the masses. While the objectives of these programs are laudable, it could be easy to find gray areas especially in their actual implementation and selection of beneficiaries.

Thus, it is crucial to guarantee that public funds are used efficiently to meet the needs of the Filipino people. Public funds should serve their intended purpose—uplifting the lives of the people—rather than advancing personal interests. While survey results show that Filipinos view government welfare programs as beneficial and believe they could actually complement economic decisions to improve the people's well-being and economic security, it is important to ensure that these programs remain apolitical.

Issues of National Security

In February 2025, China was exposed to have made a dangerous maneuver in Bajo de Masinloc: a China People's Liberation Army (PLA) helicopter came dangerously close to a Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources aircraft. This is just one among several acts that China has committed in the West Philippine Sea. There has been a broader and sustained pattern of undermining our sovereign rights in our own domain over the past few years.

Reports of such incidents do not go by unnoticed by the people. More than eight in ten Filipinos now say they favor candidates who will defend national security and sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea. Indeed, leadership should also be seen in championing Philippine sovereignty in the face of aggression by a bigger, foreign power.

A Pulse Asia survey conducted among 2,400 respondents between from January 18 to 25, 2025 showed that seven out of ten Filipinos will not support pro-China candidates (at present or in the past) in the coming elections.

The numbers have changed since another similar survey was taken in November 2024. At that time, 65% of respondents

Support Or Non-Support For A Pro-China Candidate In The May 2025 National Elections: Philippines

November 2024 and January 2025
In Percent

Figure 6



PulseAsia
RESEARCH INC.

Base: Total Interviews*									
Are you going to support a candidate in the May 2025 national elections who is PRO-CHINA at present or in the past?	RP	LOCATION				CLASS			
		NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E	
Will support	Jan '25	14	13	16	6	15	10	13	18
	Nov '24	13	8	15	5	20	24	12	14
	Change*	+1	+5	+1	+1	-5	-14	+1	+4
Will not support	Jan '25	68	70	65	78	63	74	69	55
	Nov '24	65	76	56	82	61	49	66	70
	Change*	+3	-6	+9	-4	+2	+25	+3	-15
Cannot say	Jan '25	19	16	19	15	22	15	18	27
	Nov '24	22	16	29	13	19	27	22	16
	Change*	-3	0	-10	+2	+3	-12	-2	+11

said that they would not support a pro-China candidate; just two months after, the number inched up to 68%. The change is most notable among respondents belonging to the ABC socio-economic class – whereas just 49% said in November 2024 they would not vote for pro-China candidates, the number increased to 74% of 25 percentage points in just a matter of two months.

These numbers show a growing and deepening mistrust of candidates who align themselves with China, or who have had a history of putting China's interests ahead of the Philippines. China's actions undermine Philippine interests and betray a gross disrespect for the rules-based international order.

Philippine leaders, elected by Filipinos, are expected to champion Filipino interests above all. The country's immediate and long-term security should not be sacrificed for the sake of promises

of loans or investments, unconditional friendship, or just because of the difference in size or military might. In the past, Filipinos have seen the leaders they have elected prioritize the interests of other countries. For example, the previous administration did not assert the Philippines' victory over China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Aside from issues of territory, the dangers of having pro-China candidates also became evident in the proliferation of Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) aided by officials who allow their areas to be POGO hubs.

In 2016, then-President Duterte authorized the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR) to issue licenses to POGOs, citing their economic benefits and potential contribution to revenues. However, in 2023, POGOs fell short of expectations, contributing only PHP 13 billion in taxes, far below PAGCOR's projected PHP24

billion. Additionally, the Bureau of Internal Revenue and the Department of Finance reported that POGOs owe PHP50 billion in unpaid taxes and have caused economic losses of around PHP265 billion.

Worse, POGO hubs have only served as centers of criminal activity, from financial scams and money laundering to other crimes like prostitution, human trafficking, and murder. POGO hubs are also opportunities for espionage activities where foreign nationals are able to move freely and gather intelligence about the Philippines using sophisticated tools.

Most of the promised investments did not come to pass, and loans were given in terms that were grossly disadvantageous to the Philippines.

Indeed, POGOs have proven to be a bane to Philippine national and

economic security. This is the reason more Filipinos have become wary of officials who are pro-China even as they outwardly pledge commitment to their Filipino constituents.

Disinformation as an Issue of Security and Democracy

In January 2025, Pulse Asia found that the internet, specifically social media platforms, remains one of the top sources of news for Filipinos.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents across the country identified the internet as their second top source of news; under this, Facebook and YouTube are the dominant platforms. Other sources of news are television (85%), radio (35%), family/relatives (33%), and

friends and acquaintances (17%). Only 1% of respondents cited newspapers as their news source.

Another survey, this time conducted by the SWS in February 2025, revealed that 59% of Filipinos believe that fake news on the internet is a serious problem. Likewise, 62% of Filipinos believe that fake news in media is also a serious problem.

With the growing reliance on digital news sources comes the danger of misinformation and disinformation. Not all Filipino internet users are able to distinguish facts from disinformation, or are able to identify legitimate sites. Facebook and YouTube, two of the most popular platforms according to the survey, do not guarantee the legitimacy and veracity of

everything that is posted on them.

As a result, many Filipinos could fall prey — just as they have before — to disinformation. According to the same survey, it is somewhat difficult for 43% of Filipinos to discern fake news while 22% say that it is very difficult. Moreover, the survey showed that 55% of Filipinos frequently see or encounter fake news on TV, radio, or social media. Public opinion could be shaped by those who have their own agenda to manipulate the general public sentiment. Hence, there is a need to empower citizens through media and information literacy initiatives so that they could distinguish facts from disinformation attempts.

Ultimately, critical thinking and media and information literacy will have an

Source Of News, Overall : Philippines

January 18-25, 2025/Philippines
in Percent / Multiple Response, up to 3 allowed

Figure 7



PulseAsia
RESEARCH INC.

	Base: Total Interviews* 100%							
	LOCATION					CLASS		
	RP	NCR	LUZ	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
TELEVISION	85	90	93	81	70	90	88	54
National	79	90	88	77	59	87	82	51
Local	9	0	5	15	16	5	10	6
RADIO	35	8	37	38	40	27	36	34
National	19	8	30	8	11	13	20	11
Local	17	0	7	30	32	14	16	24
NEWSPAPER	1	1	1	2	0	2	1	1
Broadsheet	1	0	0	2	0	2	0	1
National	0.5	0	0	1	0	2	0	0
Local	0.2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Tabloid	0.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
National	0.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Local	0.03	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
INTERNET	78	87	78	77	74	84	78	68
Online news sites	4	2	7	0	3	5	4	1
Facebook	74	82	73	75	70	72	75	66
X/Twitter	1	1	1	0	2	6	0	1
YouTube	37	58	32	37	37	51	36	32
Other social media sites	4	3	6	2	5	2	5	5
Family/Relatives	33	23	31	32	41	30	29	59
Friends/Acquaintances	17	26	15	15	18	11	16	31

impact on voter behavior. As Filipinos become more media- and information-literate, they will become better at distinguishing mere propaganda from real information. It will thus be more difficult for unscrupulous actors to sway people's perception without solid, verifiable evidence.

On the other hand, if the people are not enabled to think critically and evaluate what they see online, it would be easier for malign actors to push unsubstantiated claims, misleading or downright wrong narratives, as well as skewed political discourse, online. These will be taken as gospel truths and then pushed without question, tilting the balance in favor or disinformation peddlers. As a result, the quality of collective decision making of Filipinos will suffer.

Conclusions

Based on the above situationer, the following conclusive pointers need to be considered:

1. Politics needs to be shown as connected to the people's well-being, instead of a mere turf war among prominent personalities. The so-called UniTeam that swept the 2022 elections has been exposed to be a flimsy alliance. As a result, the animosity between the Dutertes and the Marcoses, highlighted by the arrest of former President Rodrigo Duterte and the looming impeachment of current Vice President Sara Duterte, only serves to highlight the kind of personality politics with consequences that are far removed from the everyday lives of Filipinos. Whatever happens in the political sphere, the very real and basic economic concerns will remain to be top of mind for Filipinos.

When the noise settles, the focus will be on politicians who have the ability to make a difference in the people's economic situation — whether this difference is genuine and sustainable, or merely palliative and short-term, is where the distinction needs to be made.

2. The public will not hesitate to voice their dissatisfaction with their leader, whatever the political affiliation, if they do not feel tangible economic gains. Empirical surveys have underscored that Filipinos are preoccupied with economic issues. Whatever is happening in the political sphere may have little to no consequence on people's ability to purchase the basic needs that their families need to survive from day to day, or to have a sustainable source of income, or to realistically contemplate a better future for their children.

Thus, the popularity of current leaders ultimately depend on their ability to make economic improvements better felt by more Filipinos.

Announcing nominal gains or the hitting of targets in inflation or job creation may not be enough to allay the people's apprehensions about

their economic security. People need to feel economic progress in terms of their own daily experiences and actual lives. Moreover, people need to see more of the administration's efforts to address these economic challenges not only for a specific time period but sustainably and for the long term.

3. Social welfare programs must be shown to be transparent and implemented according to objectives. Surveys show that Filipinos are aware of the government's top social welfare programs like 4Ps, TUPAD, and AKAP, and many believe that they are helpful to their target beneficiaries. However, such programs could be suspected of serving as tools for politicians to curry favor with the people. With some discretion involved in the administration of these programs, there may indeed be instances when these could be used to advance the personal and political interests of a few under the guise of administering a government social initiative.

Surveys have highlighted that the people are actually aware of these top programs and do consider them helpful in their daily struggle to make ends meet. These initiatives provide a good complement to other government actions whose results are yet to be felt by the public, like efforts to keep the prices of goods and services low. However, care must be given so that the administration of these programs are attended by transparency and accountability, and so that the programs reach their intended beneficiaries whether or not they are potential voters, or are allied with the incumbents.

4. Filipino voters do pay attention to candidates' advocacies and positions on various issues. As of January 2025, or four months prior to the conduct of the May 12 elections, survey respondents said they would vote for candidates who will prioritize job creation, food security, the health care system, workers' rights including

the welfare of OFWs, reducing poverty and hunger, addressing climate change and enhancing disaster preparedness, controlling the prices of basic goods and services, defending national security in the West Philippine Sea and the achievement of energy security as well as the usage of renewable energy.

Thus, if candidates want to be considered a viable choice for voters in the coming elections, they must align their advocacies and platforms to what the people are looking for. Today's voters, even while still largely influenced by popularity and name recall, are also looking to identify with candidates who display the same values and priorities as they do, especially in issues concerning the economy and the delivery of basic social services.

5. Filipinos have become increasingly wary of pro-China politicians. They have learned the hard way how leaders masquerading as public servants would actually use their positions to advance the interests of other nations. Experience in the failure to assert our arbitral victory, for instance, or in the facilitation of POGOs' entry and conduct of business, have shown us Filipinos that pro-China candidates are actually anti-Filipino because of the competing interests between the two countries. It is then important that voters are able to see candidates for who they are, including their biases and leanings that may not be apparent in their feel-good speeches but could be unearthed by looking at decisions made and positions taken in the past.

6. Alliances with like-minded countries are important in dealing with traditional and nontraditional threats. Maritime defense cannot be carried out by the Philippines on its own. International partnerships are crucial to

asserting or sovereignty and adherence to the rule of law. The Philippines is one of many nations that is relatively small compared to countries like China. China has exploited its might and its dominance as it continues to conduct gray zone operations in the West Philippine Sea, endangering our people, undermining our sovereignty, and insulting the international order.

Fortunately, the Philippines has numerous allies that share its values and respect for the rule of law, and that provide support for its defense and maritime capability. The United States, Japan, and Australia have been named by Filipinos as countries which enjoy their trust.

Even as the United States under the fresh administration of President Donald Trump has been undergoing many changes, indications are that the United States will not renege on its iron-clad commitment to support the Philippines against aggressors. The Philippines was exempted from the United States' 90-day foreign aid suspension and was granted USD336 million for the continuation of planned defense modernization programs, including naval, air, land, cyber, and support system enhancements. Taiwan also received this waiver, highlighting its strategic importance. This move underscores the United States' unwavering and ironclad support for its Indo-Pacific allies.

Japan shares many similarities with the Philippines with regard to security and defense. In December, the Philippine Senate unanimously ratified the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) between the Philippines and Japan. The RAA strengthens cooperation between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Japan Self-Defense Forces,

facilitating joint exercises like Balikatan, Kamandag, and Sama-Sama.

The RAA, easing the entry of equipment and troops for combat training and disaster response, will allow both military forces to deploy on each other's soil. This is the first such agreement that Japan has signed in Asia.

Likewise, opportunities for multilateral cooperation abound. The 6th Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity (MMCA), featuring naval and air assets from the US, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines jointly sailed the West Philippine Sea on February 5, the first MMCA under the new Trump administration.

7. Media literacy is a powerful tool to combat disinformation and improve the quality of Filipinos' discourse.

Filipinos are increasingly using the Internet as their main source of news, with Facebook and YouTube being the most prevalent. Given this, it could be easy for the people to fall prey to disinformation if they are not able to distinguish facts from propaganda or outright falsehoods. This vulnerability affects their personal and professional lives, but also the quality of democratic decisions that will be made.

Politicians are very much aware of the power of social media in swaying public opinion, and have been capitalizing on this for several elections now. Disinformation is passed around, lies and fabrications presented as truth, which in turn translates into votes for or against a particular personality.

With the reliance on the internet projected to increase as the Philippines builds its digital reach, there is now a need to push media and information literacy so that Filipinos do not fall prey

to disinformation tactics, whether during elections or ordinary periods.

8. The governance fight must be consistent, measurable, and sustained.

Among the issues deemed urgent by Filipinos is the fight against graft and corruption. Despite early gains, this remains to be a problem, with issues of transparency and accountability hounding all levels of the government.

Perceptions of how serious a government is in stamping out corruption is a significant factor in attracting the interest of potential investors. Pronouncements on governance should transcend rhetoric, and must not merely depend on whoever is sitting at the helm of the agency or local government unit. Programs to strengthen transparency in government transactions must be backed by appropriate and sustained funding, and must be implemented evenly and consistently. They must also be accompanied by objective evaluation so that they could be replicated, modified, or changed for future application.

Meanwhile, proceedings for those already charged with corruption and corruption-related offenses must be done swiftly so that they could serve as an example that corruption does not pay and that there will be a reckoning for those who treat public coffers as their own.

9. A whole-of-society approach is needed to navigate the political and economic landscape. Given the complexities and interrelatedness of today's national challenges, the solutions do not rest with the government alone. All sectors of society are stakeholders in our national affairs, and they each have their own perceptions and nuances that must be considered as solutions are crafted to address such problems. The private sector is a valuable companion to the government because of its wide reach and access to capital, as well as its technical expertise. Civil society, which includes the media and the academe, as well as sectoral non-government organizations, have the necessary reach and research needed to guide and support policy decisions. The diplomatic community provides support and effective benchmark when it comes to best practices around the world. All these, taken together, will allow the Philippines to overcome political and economic challenges, achieve its potential, and provide a higher quality of life for more of its people.

Recommendations

Political divisions and realignments are inherently part of the current electoral juncture. As elections draw near, and as the populist leadership of the Duterte unravel, we can expect deepening political divisions and battle for the hearts and minds of the electorate. The two formidable political families who once joined forces as UniTeam have now gone their separate ways, and this separation may affect political alliances and realignments for the elections.

However, if Filipinos continue to see that the fractured politics barely have

any effect on their economic advancement, the people's feelings of economic discontent are likely to trump their political leaning and shape their sentiment towards the government.

Thus, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Government leaders should focus on economic stability. A prominent gut issue is people's ability to provide the basic needs for their family. Thus, the administration should focus on building economic stability that is not just confined to official announcements or statistics but which could be felt by the average Filipino. The government should prioritize measures to control inflation, increase worker pay, and create more jobs. Effective policies must address the economic concerns of the populace, specifically those issues that have been highlighted in recent surveys.

Anti-inflation measures, specifically, should have tangible effects at the soonest possible time as people continue to grapple with their inability to buy food and other necessities. External factors that affect the stability of prices — for instance, short supply, or damage brought by typhoons or dry seasons — should be anticipated and prepared for.

2. The public should keep track of campaign promises and measure these against actual performance. Elections add another layer to people's expectations, because candidates may feel compelled to make promises that are economic in nature, for example keeping the prices of goods at a certain level, or creating thousands of new jobs. Candidates must know that people are holding them accountable to their campaign promises and will measure their actual performance and achievements against these utterances. Media organizations and election-related organizations should maintain a database of these promises to

ensure compare with what is actually accomplished once they get the job.

3. Candidates should align their priorities with issues deemed important by Filipinos and offer solutions that are evidence-based, measurable, and time-bound. Because Filipinos have already established the issues — economic stability, job creation, food security, education, healthcare, and national sovereignty — which they want candidates to prioritize, those running for public posts should listen and align their executive or legislative platforms to what the people deem important.

4. The government should have a detailed plan for sustained employment and job creation, taking into consideration developments and trends in the job market.

Unemployment numbers highlight the need for policies that drive labor market growth and attract industry investments. There remain many areas in which Filipino talent remains underutilized due to labor market constraints.

Development of human capital and enabling it to reach full potential is essential not only to economic progress but to inclusive growth and the improvement of Filipinos' quality of life.

5. The government should enhance and expand social welfare programs but ensure transparency and accountability in their implementation. Many Filipinos are aware of social welfare programs like the 4Ps, TUPAD, and AKAP and find them to be helpful to their economic state, especially since they are as yet unable to perceive results in official anti-inflation initiatives. Specific programs for underprivileged families, or those who saw disruption in their source of income,

or whose regular earnings fall below the poverty threshold, provide significant relief to targeted beneficiaries.

However, there remains the impression that social programs like these can be used to advance the personal and political interests of a few. To guard against this, officials have to make sure that the implementation of these programs and the selection of beneficiaries are undertaken according to the spirit and letter of the program, and that there is a transparent and accountable process through which progress can be tracked. These social welfare programs should also be implemented parallel to vigorous economic programs to empower the people to find or maintain jobs, and generate income that would allow them to meet their basic needs.

Done right, expanded and enhanced social welfare programs would greatly assist the people and empower them while they pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities.

6. The government must strengthen partnerships with international allies.

Our leaders should also continue strengthening partnerships with allies in the international community like the United States, Japan, and Australia, among others. Linkages like these will ensure both economic progress and national security. We will benefit from trade and investment opportunities in key sectors like infrastructure, renewable energy, and semiconductor manufacturing, and this will enhance the Philippines' economic resilience. By deepening collaboration in technology transfer, supply chain integration, and market access, the Philippines can position itself as a competitive player in the global economy while strengthening its strategic alliances.

These relationships will also support our firm stand against aggressive actors in the West Philippine Sea, and those that threaten our security in traditional defense spheres and in nontraditional areas like cybersecurity, and in weeding out POGOs that are harmful to our economy and security.

7. Filipinos should enhance their media and information literacy.

Enhancing voter education and media literacy will prevent our people from falling prey to those sowing disinformation for their personal, financial, or political gain. Because more and more Filipinos are obtaining their news from social media sites like Facebook and YouTube, they need to be made aware that not everything on these sites are accurate, and that some groups are deliberately causing confusion and pushing disinformation.

Media and information literacy training will enable the people to distinguish truth from falsehood, and will prevent them from immediately believing what they see online. It will help cultivate a culture of verification and critical thinking so that Filipinos could make better democratic decisions for themselves, their families, communities, and country.

8. Government leaders should prioritize governance, transparency, and accountability. The upcoming elections present a critical opportunity for the Philippines to address these pressing issues and steer the country toward a more resilient and prosperous future. Leaders must set an example of normalizing the disclosure of their personal net worth and subjecting their offices to scrutiny and audit, recognizing that they are merely entrusted public funds that they could use for the benefit of the people. Policymakers

references

should institute processes that foster consistency in the implementation of transparency programs, and ensure that these are applied evenly across geographical areas.

9. All stakeholders must build on their own unique perspectives and strengths and collaborate to propose, push for, and implement solutions to the country's myriad of problems.

Challenges faced by Filipinos have been present for a long time and will persist long after this election cycle. Thus, all of society must come together to discuss ways of cooperating and resolving these issues, focusing on structural reforms and evidence-guided action plans that would go beyond political rivalries, controversies, or noise.

Elections are a mere weeks away, and it is time for Filipinos to take stock of the democratic options they have among those applying for the thousands of elective government posts. For this election year and in the elections to come, it is crucial that the people arm themselves with critical thinking skills so that they can make enlightened political decisions, both for the present well-being and the benefit of future generations.

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