

## Nico Ravanilla, Research Statement, Spring 2017

Ravanilla’s research thus far centers on **democratic accountability** – how citizens hold the elected government accountable. In particular, his research explores the factors that explain how *clientelism* – the contingent exchange of money for votes – undermines accountability, and why it is difficult to fight. Two findings have come out of this strand of research, which are reported in separate working papers. Additionally, an article expounding on the key dependent variable examined in one of the papers has been published in the premier conference proceedings in the field of economics (AER P&P).

The first finding is that it is difficult to fight clientelism because voters underestimate their temptation to vote-sell. At the time that they accept money, they don’t think it will change their vote, but when they get to the polls, they find it much harder to resist being reciprocal to the vote-buying candidate. Consequently, exceedingly simple policy interventions – such as asking voters to promise “not to take any money from candidates” – can help reduce vote-selling because it helps them fight the temptation to vote-sell. However, popular anti-vote-selling campaigns like the ones that make voters promise to “accept money, but vote your conscience” can ironically increase vote-selling, precisely because it gives voters license to yield to the temptation now, but nonetheless make it hard for voters to stick to their true candidate preference later. [WP1]

A central challenge in assessing the impact of any anti-vote-selling campaign is creating a valid measure of vote-selling. Measuring vote-selling is clearly not a trivial endeavor, particularly in contexts (including the Philippines) where individual votes are not publicly observed. Ravanilla describes a proxy measure constructed out of self-reports of Philippine voters participating in the study, and present empirical patterns of correlation that he argues help validate it as a measure of vote-selling. This measure is the key outcome variable in the paper described above. [PUB1]

The second finding in this strand of research is that it is difficult to fight clientelism because political campaigns exploit voters’ embeddedness in social networks to target private inducements and influence behavior at the polls. In this research, Ravanilla exploits local naming conventions to assess blood and marriage links between voters and local political candidates spanning one whole city in the Philippines. He then collects survey data on pre-election candidate leanings as well as actual voting behavior (after the election) of voters randomly drawn from these family networks. Ravanilla shows that family ties are predictive of voter preferences prior to the election and provides evidence that this is because clientelistic targeting is channeled through family networks, and that it is most effective in influencing the behavior of voters who are more proximate to a candidate. [WP2]

Another strand of Ravanilla’s research focuses on **distributive politics** – how the elected government distributes scarce public goods and services. Specifically, Ravanilla’s current research demonstrates how electoral constraints and opportunities to mobilize votes impact legislator incentive to supply fiscal legislative particularism (commonly known as “pork”).

Three findings have come out of this strand of research, which are reported in a chapter in an award-winning book publication, and two separate working papers.

First, Ravanilla examines how legislators allocate discretionary repair and reconstruction funds in the wake of typhoons in the Philippines. He produces a baseline estimate for post-disaster need by calculating storm exposure indexes for every municipality. Then, controlling for storm exposure, he analyzes the effect of political connections on funds distribution across localities, showing that clan ties between legislators and mayors increase reconstruction funds allocated to a given municipality by a meaningful magnitude. [**PUB2**]

Second, Ravanilla builds on the preceding research by demonstrating that legislators by and large bias pork distribution in favor of powerful co-partisans at the local level. He shows that patronage underpins this observed pattern. This is an empirically difficult case to make because it is typically confounded with other dynamics of pork distribution (e.g. swing voter theory, classic “pork barelling”, and unconditional partisan bias). Ravanilla employs regression discontinuities in razor-close mayoral and House races to identify the causal effect of partisan alignments and estimate heterogeneous local average treatment effects (HLATE) to rule-out competing explanations. [**WP3**]

Third, Ravanilla shows that partisan motives are hardly the only drivers of the supply of distributive benefits. Legislators also consider the electoral costs. Analyzing how Philippine Senators spend their discretionary funds, Ravanilla demonstrates that when targeting local co-partisans is electorally costly, legislators find other ways to use pork to build a personal vote. Exploiting the staggered-term structure of Senate elections, he shows that legislators with nationwide constituencies (as Philippine Senators do), backload pork utilization in the run-up to election, but do not behave any differently than non-reelectionists in choosing the mix of targeted versus non-targeted spending. [**WP4**]