

Suffrage 101

On May 9, 2016 we will be trekking to the polls to cast our votes. According to the latest statistics, out of 100 million Filipinos, more than half or 54.6 million are registered voters. These include two of my three children, aged 18 and 19, who will exercise their right to vote for the first time.

They ask and seek guidance on who to vote for but I struggle to provide answers. First, I take a deep breath, say a little prayer and start with the basics. I tell them that we will choose among many candidates those whom we believe are most qualified to fill leadership roles in the executive and legislative branches at various levels of government. These cover national, provincial and local government posts but not barangay (village) officials, whom we will vote for later this year in October. In all, we will have to choose candidates for some 30 or so positions from the country's president to city or town council members.

Second, I say to my children that we are blessed we live in a democracy, no matter how imperfect, and we have the right to suffrage. It gives us a voice, and an opportunity to influence matters that have an impact on the current state and future of our country and people.

The conversation then flows to who we are as a people. This leads to a quick socio-economic snapshot of voters who will be speaking on behalf of the rest of the population, a quarter of which are considered poor. As in the last presidential elections in 2010, about 43% of the voting age population are not gainfully employed and 47% are millennials (18-34 years old). Of those with work, almost half are manual workers including farmers, forestry workers and fishermen. The rest are workers in manufacturing plants, trade and sales/services, with a small portion categorized as professionals, clerks and technicians.

With this profile, my children and I agree that the most important issues for the country revolve around economic well-being – having and keeping jobs, putting food on the table, health care and education. And for any initiative toward addressing these issues to take root, there must be peace



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and order. They were quick to add: what about the horrible traffic situation? Yes, infrastructure will be key.

Third, given a better understanding of what we believe our country needs, how do we go about determining who is most deserving of our votes as "servant leaders"? I suggest a systematic approach – one that does not radically depart from what corporate boards do when choosing among CEO candidates. It starts with clarity around competencies and character.

Competencies refer to demonstrable behavior, skills sets and proven abilities: **1** the ability to communicate a clear and inspiring direction and vision of what is possible from the realities of the present; **2** connecting and engaging with others in all realms where she/he operates in to build consensus, collaboration and dynamically resolve conflict; **3** resolute and effective decision-making in the face of constant, complex and rapid change; **4** a deep sense of accountability for results and bias for measurable execution; and **5** high energy and holistic health – body, mind and spirit – to lift the, at times, sagging spirit of our nation. Character refers to the inner fabric of a leader's "being", the distinctive set of principles he lives by, integrity, moral strength, and who he/she really is "when no one is looking".

At this point, my children's eyes start to glaze but we agree that it is as much our responsibility to know our candidates, as it is our privilege to exercise the right to suffrage.

My children and I are not yet done with the process of choosing candidates in the May polls but I fervently wish everybody is having the same conversation with family members, friends and colleagues. Heads of community, business, religious and civil society groups should, as an "act of leadership," convene meetings to allow their constituents to collectively ask and reflect on how we should choose our next set of leaders. **1**

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