



WITTGENSTEIN'S LANGUAGE GAMES IN FIESTA POLITICS: A STUDY ON POLITICAL PATRONAGE IN FIESTA CELEBRATIONS IN SELECT COMMUNITIES IN METRO MANILA

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ABSTRACT

Fiestas are utilized as means of politicians' assertion of their political ambitions through public appearances, sponsorship of activities, and the distribution of goods and monetary aid. This is where the term "fiesta politics" comes in – a phenomenon manifested in varying forms like the reinforcements aligned with patronage politics rampant in the Philippines. This paper sought to shed light into the mechanisms into which politicians leverage on the social binding force of fiestas in select communities in Metro Manila in the form of political patronage. In this deliberate display of polity, politicians intend for the reciprocation of political loyalty from their constituents as it translates into electoral gain. Drawing from Ludwig Wittgenstein's language-games, the study interprets these political gestures as forms of communication whose meanings are shaped and shared by cultural rules and community interpretation. Using a phenomenological approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with select participants aged 30-60 to explore lived experiences and perceptions of political behavior during fiestas. Findings revealed that such acts were often understood as reciprocity grounded in cultural values, yet they also function as political manipulation. The study concludes that fiesta politics persists due to cultural toleration and is morally framed as reciprocity.

Keywords: *Fiesta politics, political patronage, fiesta, Wittgenstein, language games*

INTRODUCTION

Filipinos' strong proclivity to festive celebrations is evident from preparation to celebration as it is a vivid display of social engagement (Chan, 2023). This is largely due to the tricentennial history of subjugation of the Philippines under the Spanish Crown which brought along with it Christian indoctrination (Guillermo, 1990; Roces, 1980). However, despite its cultural and religious position in the social fabric, fiestas have provided an opportunity for political actors to leverage on its social binding force over their constituents (Tatel, 2013; Hau, 2017). Fiesta celebrations are utilized as means of politicians' assertion of their political ambitions through public appearances, sponsorship of festive activities, and the distribution of goods and monetary aid. This is where the term "fiesta politics" comes in – a phenomenon manifested in varying forms like the aforementioned reinforcements which is aligned to patronage politics rampant in the Philippines. In this deliberate display of polity, politicians extend material goods and financial grants, which can be applicable to all levels of social classes, with the intention of their reciprocation of political loyalty (Sidel, 1999).

The conceptual premise of this study encapsulates political patronage which is frequently found synonymous to clientelism. However, there is a thin line distinguishing one from another (Hutchcroft, 2017) and it is the intention of this paper to draw that difference as well. Political patronage is defined by Teehankee (2012) as a patron with access to state resources providing varying benefits and grants in return for the recipient's support. Whereas clientelism is a more direct and personal relations of power wherein a person of higher social standing makes use of his influence and resources, either sourced from the state or privately, in exchange for the services of a client of a lower social class (Scott, 1972).

Often, patronage and clientelism are interchangeably used to illustrate exchanges of political favors given the dyadic transactions which more often than not demonstrates imbalance of power. However, the distinguishing feature lies in the role of the provider and the source of their resources. These two political stratagems are more usually observed at the onset and duration of election season where there is a dire need to appeal to and attract support for a political patron's ambition to gain or remain in power.

One best way to showcase these exchanges in favors is during social celebrations of fiestas which is widespread in the Philippines from its smallest unit of government up to the national level (Nuñez, 2019). Fiestas are opportune avenues for political actors to manifest their influence, power, and ambitions as they make use of the advantageous gathering of the public (Abing, R. J. et al, 2024). Whenever a fiesta is being celebrated within a certain locale, it is inevitable to see banners made of tarpaulin and sackcloth bearing festive greetings alongside the names and portraits of politicians. Gift packs, huge sums of prizes, and other paraphernalia of the likes can be observed being handed out to community members. And in the grand display of it all, the politician or an aspiring one co-mingle with the people, exchanging greetings, reminding them of the projects and benefits they have extended them, and vying for their support thereby reinforcing their power and ambitions (Ayeng, 2025). These exchanges of symbolic interactions and leveraging on religious cultural norms suggest a correspondence to how such performances translate differently from being routine fiesta activities to political capital. As the political personages engage themselves in this highly religious, symbolic, and performative interactions, they display themselves as a patron capable of disposing not only material needs, not

only the governance required of them, but also the cultural and spiritual epitome of a leader.

This opus sought to answer the following:

- (1) In what ways do political actors in Metro Manila use culturally and religiously embedded language and symbols during fiestas to shape voter perceptions;
- (2) How do community members interpret, immediate and retrospective, political performances and symbols during fiestas as part of their lived political experiences?; and
- (3) In what ways are patronage practices sustained through routinized symbolic exchanges during public and religious celebrations of fiestas?

It was the aim of the author to endeavor to illuminate these questions and employed Ludwig Wittgenstein's political interpretation through symbolic exchanges of language through his so-called language games. Albeit said, this paper sought to observe the mechanisms through which politicians leverage on fiesta celebrations for political gains and how it aids in the perception and preference of middle-aged voters in selected communities in Metro Manila. Furthermore, this study provides a buttress in understanding the urban landscape of patronage in the communities which is dissimilar to rural contexts of dyadic relationship between landowner-tenant patronage which is more closely narrated in literature. The outturn of this research will contribute to the extensive discourse on socio-cultural politics, local governance, and democratic accountability in the Philippines.

Literature Review

It can be observed how political figures (Anastacio & Morandarte, 2023), especially those in the local government level, engage in varied practices of political patronage. This is known to be an effective stratagem for political capital for the security of office. Implicitly, the enactment of the controversial and unconstitutional Priority Development Assistance Fund or PDAF (colloquially termed as pork barrel) further legitimized this practice (Candelaria, 2014). Fiesta celebrations, however, categorically a religious affair, are susceptible as well to political intermingling as politicians and the municipal governments involve themselves in the operations and fulfillment of these activities (Antolihao, 2014).

The Patron-Client Historical Context in the Philippines

The Philippines, being largely an agrarian economy, shows comparable relationships of patron-client subscription in the form of high-status landlords and tenants (usually farmers) ties (Scott, 1972). This special dyadic relationship involves substantial instrumental exchanges in which a patron of high economic status manifests his influence and resources to offer protection and other benefits to a client of lower economic level who, in turn, reciprocates it by offering wide-ranging support and services. It comes to no surprise then those politicians, incumbent or aspirant, employ patronage and clientelistic methods to attract political support and loyalty. It has become an effective mode of gaining the buy-in of voters and establishing loyalty by means of selective and deliberate use of public funds and resources that are attractive to the electorate (Lande, 1968; Roniger, 2004; Magno et al, 2024). Such was the incarnation of the controversial and unconstitutional Priority Development Assistance (PDAF) or more commonly known as pork barrel fund which, as Kasuya et al (2009) puts it, "the first major method of providing patronage in the Philippines". The release of this state-sponsored fund to legislators allowed them to make use of the pork barrel into their advantage by organizing supplementary community projects, procurement of technological equipment for schools and government offices, medical assistance programs for indigents, and the like with the

intention and implicit advertisement for reelection (Kawanaka, 1998; Teehankee, 2012; Hutchcroft, 2017).

Political Economy of Fiesta Celebrations

Fiesta celebrations in the Philippines have always been viewed in the lens of socio-cultural realm as events that reinvigorate and bind the people of varying narratives in their religious, cultural, and social collectivism (Wendt, 1998; Mendible, 2002). However, there is much needed attention to dive into its political dimensions as fiestas have also been leveraged by political interests and ambitions of the elites (Roces, 1978). More than their prominent attendance, politicians also get involved in the operations of fiesta celebrations as they take on active roles as sponsors and benefactors, or, as colloquially termed, *hermano mayor* (translation: major sponsor) (Antolihao, 2014). It is common to observe politicians' sponsorship of festive events and activities through funding as fiesta celebrations can be extravagant affairs (Del Monte & Cabaguing, 2024). To some extent, the municipal government takes over fiesta celebrations as a socio-cultural affair for the constituents relying on the Church to facilitate the religious aspects of the celebrations such as the Holy Mass, novenas, processions, and the like. Fiesta-locus patronage operates masked with cultural traditions which presents it as socially acceptable and hides the scrutiny of electoral malpractice. This display of polity serves a duality in purpose: to reinforce their visibility within the community and to informally refortify their network of support that would then convert to political capital (Hau, 2017). On the other hand, with the continued practice of involving political figures in fiesta celebrations for sponsorship, there is an implied reliance of ecclesial affairs on contributions from political personages given their renowned elite position in the locale (Tamayo, 2022).

Politicizing Philippine Cultural Norms

It has long been acknowledged how culturally derived social norms play a significant role in shaping political behavior and, for that reason, it is often strategically exploited by political figures to their advantage (Montiel, 2002; Touseef et al, 2023; Groenendyk, Kimbrough, & Pickup, 2025). Certain Filipino values and norms are heavily capitalized for political gains such as *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), *pakikipagkapwa* (strong interpersonal connection), and *pakikisama* (solidarity) among others. These aforementioned values are deeply embedded in Filipino culture that politicians leverage on them to justify their unideal political agenda asserting that their intentions are helpful contributions to the community, forming an *ayuda* culture, despite conspicuously ill-intended (Benitez, 2022). This *ayuda* culture (literal translation: aid), is a political strategy for underprivileged constituents to depend on politicians for financial and material assistance (Palatino, 2025). It is without doubt that this stratagem makes use of government funds that are intended for the poor but is a convenient tool for patronage programs not only for the constituent beneficiaries, but, as well as a form of reward to incumbent political allies. Consequently, as political personages increasingly justify these practices that are masked as community improvement programs and received as beneficial by the constituents, it has become an ambiguous political stratagem that is socially accepted due to Filipino's moral value of *delicadeza* (politeness) (Roces, 1999).

Exploitation of Religion as a Social Institution

The Philippines boasts of being the only Catholic nation in Southeast Asia that possesses strong religious culture with a predominant subscription to Christianity (Zaide, 1978; Cartagenas, 2010). With this, religion and polity inevitably intertwine in the Philippine political arena. Despite being enshrined in the fundamental law of the land, secularism rests on frail cultural grounds not only due to most of the religious affiliation, but even more so due to historical civic involvement and movements attributed to religious doctrine (Dagdag, 1998; Choo et al, 2020; Rivera, 2022). Rivera, SJ (2010) borrowed a term from sociologist Christian Smith (1996) to call Catholicism in the Philippines as a

“disruptive religion” which was introduced in the sociology lexicon to denote that religious faith additionally is an agent of social mobilization as it operates to produce meaning systems of duality transcending from divine realities unto earthly situations. Furthermore, Smith posits that while devotion to the belief of the divine compels believers to hold conservative principles, it is also inevitable for religion to manifest a call to social action that emanates “disruptive collective activism”. This is the very postulation that the church holds in its staunch pronouncements and stance in influencing politics and for this reason, as well, political figures associate themselves to religious institutions to make a brand of advocating their ideals and result to electorate preference (Perterra, 1988; Inductivo, 2012). There have been multiple occasions wherein the interplay of the church and the state have raised concerns of excessive entanglement (Shirley, 2003). Most notable was the case of seven Filipino bishops receiving donations in the form of SUVs (Sports Utility Vehicles) from the Philippine Charity and Sweepstakes Office (PCSO), the country’s primary government agency mandated to raise funds for charity programs of national character (Crescini & Fabros, 2011). This controversy gained national traction and was convened in a quasi-judicial Senate hearing compelling the involved ecclesiastical personages to return the vehicles extended to them. Several senators expressed support to the episcopates involved. The late Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago (2011) provided lumination on the matter and that the bishops were not to be incriminated based on the threefold lemon test (from a U.S. Supreme Court decision in the 1971 *Lemon v. Kurtzman* case on the First Amendment) determining the (1) purpose- Does it have a secular purpose?; (2) effect- Does the law (act) have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion?; and (3) entanglement- Does the law (act) create an excessive entanglement between religion and government? There is clearly a violation of the establishment clause as the vehicle donations from PCSO only benefited Catholic bishops and no similar donations were extended to other non-Catholic religious ministers.

The Church and Patronage Politics

Religious institutions, having substantial influence on its followers, are coveted allies to secure endorsement or similar gestures of support, implicit and explicit, by politicians in an effort to leverage on their huge count of following to raise their electoral chances thereby converting it into political capital (Brillantes, Lorenzo, & Wang Sin, 2021; Sarkodie-Addo, S. & Opoku, J. 2023). This is a practice apparent in the Philippines, especially to a particular religious organization of Philippine origin with a particular notoriety on bloc voting, the Iglesia ni Cristo (abbreviated to INC) (Reyes, 2016). This practice extends to other religious groups, as well. Founder of the Jesus is Lord Movement and former presidential aspirant, Eduardo Villanueva, lost but had his son, Senator Joel Villanueva, elected as Congressman then as Senator; the El Shaddai Movement with its Spiritual Director Bro. Mike Velarde openly endorsed fourteen senatorial candidates with majority springing from former President Duterte’s slate; the Catholic Church, though firmly lobbies against several government policies, remained impartial on endorsing specific electoral candidates last 2019 elections, however, some members of the clergy openly supported opposition candidates (Castro, 2019). Returning to the prominent religious group known for bloc voting, INC has lobbied for and made use of the “padrino” system, where appointive government positions are extended by the Executive to loyal supporters, and this has led to numerous successful political appointments of the sect’s members in exchange of their support (Cornelio, 2017; Villamejor-Mendoza, 2023). Notable of these advantageous appointments were from the short-lived Estrada administration, during Arroyo’s term and, most recently, of Duterte’s administration.

Theoretical Framework

In this study of fiesta politics, the author applied a frame of reference from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s magnum opus on political philosophy,

Philosophical Investigations, in order to provide a framework for analysis on the discursive, performative, and symbolic dimensions of political patronage and its place in the utilization of fiesta celebrations as a platform for political engagement and attract voter buy-in. His work on *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) provided a language-centered approach to interpreting politics with discourse on how language, in the form of language-games derive varying meanings, interpretations, and significance rooted on the context, use, and shared linguistic norms of any given community.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations

Wittgenstein’s work on the *Philosophical Investigations* posits that political personages make use of symbolic languages termed as language games or, as he calls it in German, ‘*spiel*’ (*shpel*), that cross a complex junction of similarities and differences in interpretation. He also makes mention of this in his work on *Tractatus* of how one and the same symbols may have different meanings on different occasions (Johnston, 2007). Religion is renowned by political actors as a compelling agent of political socialization due in large part to its influence in dictating and shaping the public’s beliefs, values, and moral compass with its customs, symbols, and doctrines (Sherkat, 2003). As politicians involve themselves in the symbolic and dramatic ceremonies of religious institutions as active participants and benefactors, they manifest the *spiel* as their performative partaking and is decoded with diverse translations by the public recipients (Das & Neog, 2020).

To further place into fiestas within the frame of interpretation from Wittgenstein, the following principles will align language games in the events of religious fiesta celebrations:

Meaning is Contextual and Social in Use

In §43 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein posits that the meaning of a word is determined by its use in a specific context apart from its standard meaning. Similar to political concepts of justice, democracy, and governance, these do not have singular and static definitions but are shaped by the means of which people encounter and use them in certain social contexts thereby challenging essentialist approaches to political meaning. In fiesta politics, political language in the form of campaign slogans, promises, endorsements, and public addresses gains its meaning through its context and usage during fiesta celebrations. For their public pronouncements, active participation, and sponsorship acts during cultural festivities is a strategic positioning and aligning of their identity to cultural, religious, and symbolic attributes (Rocamora, 2008).

Language-games: Rules of Discourse Govern Political Life

The term language-games was coined to describe the multiple ways words function in various forms in life. And as games, there are rules attached to it that are only understood when partaking in its practice. Words and gestures obtain meaning only within shared frameworks as language is a public domain. The language-games that political actors practice are in the forms of governance, campaign strategies, civic identity, and symbolic power that are, in itself, regulated with rules. By performing these practices and aligning them with their identity, they aid in shaping not the objective logic but the conventions and expectations of political meanings (Pitkin, 1973; Tusalem, 2019). Similarly in fiesta activities, their performative involvement in providing financial and material donations through their sponsorship are tacit follow-through on the operations of fiesta celebrations. This further reinforces patron-client relationships not only due to the economic and legal facet but by the politician’s strategic role within the fiesta’s communicative system and leveraging on unspoken rules of reciprocity or the Filipino trait of repaying debts of gratitude.

Forms of Life and Cultural Norms

Wittgenstein describes “form of life” as a correspondence to the cultural and social framework that gives language and behavior their sense in §19 of *Philosophical Investigations*. Language is intelligible only within socially lived and shared domains. *Fiestas* are deeply intertwined with the identity, piety, and interpersonal obligations of the community such as *utang na loob* or debt of gratitude, *barkadahan* or friendships, and familialism (Medina, 2001). The involvement of politicians is not merely strategic participation but cooperators in a shared cultural norm, embedding themselves in it through their performative acts. As they immerse themselves in these “forms of life” in fiestas, they assume these identities forming a bond or solidarity among their constituents.

Rule-Following Paradox

In §185-242 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein laid out how that understanding and participating in any linguistic or social practices involve following community norms, unspoken rules that are informal and not explicit. He raises the question of how we can ascertain that we are following a rule correctly. His response was not in the interpretation of the rule but in the consensus and socially enforced structure of practices. Political norms obtain authority by the social agreement and habituated practice of the public and not solely through interpretations of legal abstracts. This is where symbolic power and institutional legitimacy is derived from (Kerr, 2004). Fiesta-locus patronage practices operate within informal yet implanted rules of who sponsors and what parts to sponsor, when and how to provide, and what kind of public performative gestures are expected. These reiterate Wittgenstein’s interpretation of public norms that are upheld through communal practice and not strict codification. If politicians fail to work within this framework, they risk public disapproval and failure to profit from electoral gain.

METHODOLOGY

This opus employed a qualitative approach with the aid of phenomenology methods to ascertain lived experiences of the citizenry. In that way we can obtain a comprehensive exploration, study, and interpretation of the socio-political perspectives of fiesta celebrations as a vehicle for political patronage in selected communities in Metropolitan Manila. These communities are situated in the Cities of Manila and San Juan and the Municipality of Pateros, as they have prominent fiesta celebrations in honor of their respective venerated religious figures. The questions will comprise a series of queries that will be designed to uncover how political patronage practices in fiesta celebrations are received, interpreted, and translated to electoral preferences.

Through the lived experiences and observations of the constituents within the communities, it will allow for a greater analysis that will supply convincing answers to the objectives of this study.

Research Design

The author applied phenomenological design to ascertain the lived experiences of middle-aged citizenry (aged between 30-60 years old) to garner distinct perspectives on the practice of political patronage where the politician is the patron and the constituents the clients.

In a study performed by Touseef et al (2023) they made use of extensive phenomenological methods, which the author likewise employed. Their use of the method provided illumination on the workings of translating cultural beliefs, values, and norms into an individual’s political ideologies, policy preferences, party affiliations, and voting behavior.

The use of this design was aptly suited to the objectives of this research as it shed personal light and brought character into the political norms in

local governments especially in the urban locale which has a distinct form of patronage practices and discourse from that of rural setting which is more narrated in literature. This method was utilized to uncover how community norms and values are derived based on the political culture that they were introduced to and encountered daily.

Sampling Technique

In order to deliberate the selection of participants with the relevant knowledge and experiences related to the phenomenon being studied, the author applied purposive sampling technique. In qualitative and phenomenological research, the objective is not to generalize statistics but to produce rich, in-depth insights from individuals with direct familiarity with the subject of inquiry which provides justification for the use of this technique for this study (Noor et al, 2024).

As this study investigates the lived experiences of community members involved in fiesta celebrations and their perceptions of political patronage, purposive sampling ensures that participants selected are the most capable of conveying detailed and contextually grounded accounts of fiesta politics within their communities. The participants were selected according to the recommendations of the community based on the age criteria between thirty (30) to sixty (60) years of age, of indigent residence in the Cities of Manila, San Juan, and the municipality of Pateros in Metro Manila, with involvement to service in a ministry in the Church and had historically exercised their suffrage rights in the local elections.

Based on the criteria and the cooperation of community members, the following accounts for the number of selected recommended participants: five (5) from San Juan City, four (4) from the Municipality of Pateros, and six (6) from the district of Tondo, Manila. Despite the individual contributions of the participants, their dispersed knowledge and experience is in fact shared. Considering Wittgensteinian philosophy, this can be attributed to the principle of *forms of life* which allows for embedded perceptions, traditions, and differing values to be integrated in the community and followed by rule-following precepts (Fayard, 2017).

Research Locale

The selection of a few local government units in Metropolitan Manila was a deliberate attempt to understand the urban setting of political patronage practices and mechanisms since existing and available literature are more inclined to discuss rural landowner-tenant “padrino” practices (Scott, 1972). The location of this study will materialize the following local communities: (1) Tondo, Manila City; (2) Poblacion, Pateros; and (3) Corazon de Jesus, San Juan City. These metropolitan cities and municipality have prominent *fiesta* celebrations widely celebrated and attributed to the cultural heritage and religious significance to their municipal locale.

The historic walls of Intramuros in Manila recently held its first *Fiesta de Intramuros* last September 7, 2024, in honor of *Nuestra Señora de la Consolacion y Correa*, patroness of the walled city. It was a community celebration with a series of religious and cultural activities, with participation of Manila Mayor Honey Lacuna-Pangan and his vice mayor, as *hermana* and *hermano mayores*, or benefactors of the festivities (GMA Integrated News, 2024). Similarly in the district of Tondo, Manila, the feast of the Holy Child, colloquially known as *Santo Niño*, is widely celebrated both by community residents and a huge following from nearby cities every January. Commission on Elections Commissioner George Garcia in January of 2025 called out politicians who leveraged on the religious and social gathering of the said *fiesta* to woo voters and advance their political ambitions in the nearing elections (Ayeng, 2025).

Furthermore, the selection of Manila, San Juan, and Pateros give credit to their population density and voter count which creates ideal conditions for studying fiesta politics. Manila’s extremely dense population and high

voter base amplify the visibility and political impact of symbolic acts during fiestas. San Juan’s compact but dense electorate makes patronage networks more intimate and traceable within tightly-knit communities. Meanwhile, Pateros, being Metro Manila’s smallest but highly dense municipality, allows direct observation of face-to-face political exchanges where generosity quickly translates into electoral impressions. (Commission on Elections, 2022; Philippine Statistics Authority, 2025)

Table 1. Population Density and Voter Base

Locality	Population (2020)	Land Area (km²)	Population Density (persons/km²)	Registered Voters (2022)
Manila City	1,846,513	24.98	≈ 73,920	≈ 1,133,706
San Juan City	126,347	5.94	≈ 21,274	≈ 109,410
Pateros Municipality	65,227	1.76	≈ 37,045	≈ 33,952

Analytical Procedures

In conducting this study and to put skin on the methods, the author engaged with community leaders (official or de-facto) and sought recommendations on the participants within the locale to identify a minimum of ten (10) but not more than fifteen (15) representative participants to shed light on the questions pertinent to this research. There was prior communication with the identified participants to briefly educate them on the objectives of this paper, obtain their consent, and inform them of their role in this study. Once consent and agreements on the nature of the study had been granted, participants were visited individually to facilitate semi-structured interviews with prepared

questions but with room for spontaneous inquiries. In this manner, the participants and the author were able to gather unvarnished and informed expressions of their experiences.

The line of questioning was investigatory in nature to uncover how local residents, organizations, and political actors experience and interpret the political meanings, patronage practices, and symbolic gestures embedded in fiesta celebrations. The interview questions were aligned with Wittgensteinian principles on language games to investigate how words, actions, and symbols function and are translated within religious and politically meaningful contexts. Questions also contained retrospective inquiry to faithfully recall prior experiences that are more recent to allow a better grasp of understanding on the setting of fiesta politics.

In analyzing the interview data, the author contextualized Wittgenstein’s language-games framework to interpret how participants assigned meaning to political gestures during fiestas. Codes and themes were examined in relation to the communities’ shared *form of life*, allowing the researcher to see how terms like *tulong*, *ayuda*, *utang na loob*, *serbisyo*, and more normalized patronage as moral reciprocity. Attention was also given to how gestures such as donations and participation in the operation of religious activities like processions were understood through culturally embedded rules. Variations in interpretation, especially near elections, were analyzed to capture how repeated practices became ritualized and politically meaningful within local *fiesta* contexts. These were major indicators that were aimed to be observed or gathered but are not limited to such to allow deeper understanding of fiesta politics from community members themselves.

Table 2. Operationalization of Language-Games in Fiesta Politics

Wittgensteinian Language-Games	Popular Fiesta Patronage Terms	Operational Meaning in Fiesta Politics
Form of Life	tradisyon natin, kasama namin, panata	Politicians align themselves with long-standing religious-cultural rituals to appear naturally embedded in the community.
Language-Game	stage greetings, " <i>Viva</i> , (<i>mention patron saint's name</i>), sponsorship messages	Acts like giving, speaking, or appearing in processions gain meaning from the fiesta’s cultural rulebook.
Rule-Following	ayuda, donations, dole outs	Communities expect leaders to show generosity; failure to do so may be seen as neglect or lack of care.
Symbolic Acts	leading processions, church attendance	These acts communicate humility, religiosity, and moral worth.
Public Performance	onstage appearances, public blessings	Being seen giving or participating transforms gestures into political capital.
Use Determines Meaning	<i>tulong</i> , <i>pagkalinga</i> , <i>suporta</i>	Patronage is labeled “help,” not “vote-buying,” making it morally acceptable.
Shared Understandings	<i>“malaking tulong,” “nakakataba ng puso,” “malasakit”</i>	Community narratives reinforce politicians’ reputations as caring leaders.
Contextual Cues	noticeable increase in donations near elections	Increased generosity before elections signals strategic intent.
Repetition & Ritual	annual sponsorships, yearly appearances	Regular participation normalizes patronage and creates long-term loyalty.
Interpretive Flexibility	‘sincere’ vs. ‘pamumulitika’	Different members interpret the same act differently based on experiences.

Similar to Touseef et al’s (2023) application of qualitative methods, through intensive one-on-one interviews the author prayed to derive a nuanced understanding of the interrelationship of political patronage practices and fiesta celebrations and how this translates to electoral gain. Additionally, an extensive content analysis was conducted to examine a diverse array of textual references including but not limited to popular magazines, social media platforms, published journal articles, and national newspapers. This allowed systematically identifying and coding themes related to political cultural norms in the form of political patronage mechanisms and its intertwining with fiesta celebrations.

By combining both these qualitative methods, the study aimed to gain a holistic understanding of the deliberate placement of patronage politics in cultural and religious celebrations at both the individual and societal

levels, ushering a comprehensive analysis of how and to what extent are cultural norms leveraged on for political capital and its translation to political gain.

Table 3. Demography of Participants

Code	Age	Domicile	Remarks
P1	63 years old	San Juan City	Voter; church server
P2	57 years old	San Juan City	Voter; church server
P3	61 years old	San Juan City	Voter; church server
P4	48 years old	San Juan City	Voter; church server
P5	51 years old	San Juan City	Voter; church server
P6	31 years old	Pateros	Voter; church server
P7	30 years old	Pateros	Voter; church server
P8	37 years old	Pateros	Voter; church server
P9	34 years old	Pateros	Voter; church server
P10	32 years old	Tondo, Manila City	Voter; church server
P11	33 years old	Tondo, Manila City	Voter; church server
P12	32 years old	Tondo, Manila City	Voter; church server
P13	30 years old	Tondo, Manila City	Voter; church server
P14	29 years old	Tondo, Manila City	Voter; church server
P15	30 years old	Tondo, Manila City	Voter; church server

FINDINGS

Material Exchange and Patronage Practices

As an opportune stage for patronage practices, it can be observed how fiestas provide the ideal opportunity to distribute goods, donations, and logistical support. Such exchanges become a language of politics. Politicians' presence in fiestas is heightened in manifestations of tangible contributions that personify care and connection to the community. These actions are linguistic gestures within the so-called game of fiesta politics. Donations take on a purposive expression of solidarity, although not verbalized but through socially recognized acts. The act of giving thus communicates belonging and commitment.

Considering this, P2 from San Juan City described below the extent of support that they received from their mayor. Such demonstration of charity masked by political patronage helps sustain this practice:

"They gave us financial assistance amounting to Php 3,000.00 each. We used it to buy what we wore last fiesta from the dress, accessories, and even footwear. Where else would you get that? We got everything completely. Importantly, on top of that, the food they gave was also really delicious. We heard it was from Mayor Zamora and we were sure it was great."

Participants further provided how local government officials take on a visibly frequent role as sponsors or donors providing meals, prizes, monetary donations, and the like. This cements their role as providers in the community. They ensure to make it known and visible that it leaves an impression of reciprocity. P2 even goes on to mention how he perceives their mayor and other local government leaders as the father of the city bound with the responsibility to look after the people. Additionally, this reflects Hicken's (2011) concept of patronal exchange where political support is mediated by reciprocal obligations. Below, P6 from Pateros and P4 from San Juan elaborated on the expected reciprocity brought about by patronage politics:

"Most of the people also vote for the candidate whom they are close or related to. And in turn, they expect that they will receive assistance when their candidate gets elected like they can get jobs in the municipal hall, they will be prioritized in welfare assistance. They expect that since they supported the candidate, they expect that they will get something in return, like the politicians owe a debt of gratitude to the people for their support."

"When they are present here, they mention pledges of support and ask what else can they do to support the church, they ask what they can donate and then the people are informed that these parts are donated by this politician, that these meals are provided by that politician."

As described by the P2, P7 and P8 from Pateros, and P11 from Tondo, Manila, the act of giving is perceptibly demonstrated through public acknowledgement, mention in programs, and the use of welcome banners; this publicization converts personal charity into political capital. The presence and engagement of politicians are treated as a favor since it provides the people accessibility to their leaders who they do not get to interact with in a usual manner. Such perception follows a "rule" domesticated that a good act is made more meaningful when substantiated publicly. Through shared conventions, it helps identify and define what constitutes a meaningful participation in the realm of fiesta politics.

Electoral Strategy and strategic timing

P3, P4, and P5 from San Juan, P9 from Pateros, P13, P14 and P15 from Tondo, made mention of the strategic temporality of political involvement in fiestas, especially with how politicians calibrate visibility, generosity, and messaging that coincides with the interval between the fiesta and elections. Presenting as advantageous, one cannot simply resist the tempting opportunity that a fiesta presents: the collective force of a gathering for a celebration and the opportune time to distribute goods without the need to brand it as campaign strategies. Timing functions as a communicative rule within the language-game of fiesta. Here, P1 from San Juan shared how this is made manifest when the fiesta celebration is within the interval of the elections:

"It's very obvious. Especially that they get to roam around the city during the procession. They don't explicitly say it but we notice it. They get the most exposure especially when elections are coming up..."

"...fiesta and religious activities have a deep spiritual and cultural value for everyone. When these politicians contribute through donations, sponsorships etc., people see them as supportive and respectful of the community's tradition. This has a big impact on how we view them during the elections."

Such patterns embody the term pragmatic patronage wherein elected officials aptly time community engagement with fiestas to maintain symbolic relations and at the same time displaying a reputation of political readiness.

This demonstrates how communities interpret timed political patronage through moral evaluation, distinguishing genuine commitment from performative and strategic service. This provides further substantiation to how fiesta celebrations provide a semiotic arena for patronage practices and appropriate timing. This is further sustained by recurring language-games of shared community perception which shapes the idea that patronage politics is heavily associated with elections.

Cultural Frames and Language Games

This study has endeavored to understand how religious symbols, moral vocabulary, and shared community values frame political actions as ethical and cultural aspects of Philippine society rather than merely strategic. As political patronage penetrates the religious and cultural nature of fiesta celebrations, it invites the community members to form and exchange ideas that leave significant impressions that may or may not be beneficial to the politicians. P3 described how their city government aims to incorporate their religious celebration into the city's cultural heritage, and this same view is shared also by P1, P2 and P4 of the same locale:

"The tourism office of the city coordinated with the parish office as the mayor wanted to collaborate with the cultural and historical celebration of the parish. They mentioned their intention to support the church's cultural plans by funding a new set of costumes for next year's caracol celebration."

Despite the use of terms that are inclined towards charity, it still describes political acts that are relational, and therefore reciprocal. Terms such as "help", "collaborate", "partnership" as used by P1 and P2 below:

"We need their help and much in the same way, they need the church's collaboration."

"It's a reciprocal thing. We also need their support during the fiesta activities, and they also need our support."

"It's a give-and-take relationship. When they need the church, we're cooperative,"

These descriptions show that the fiesta's language-game fuses beyond the pragmatic patronage that permeates religious celebrations of fiestas and goes on further to cement a marriage between the political obligation of elected officials and the spiritual role of the church to the locale. This is supplementally embedded as the community shares and shapes ideas into their culture. P15 described how cultural values such as *'hiya'* and *'utang na loob'* plays a consequential role in the community's engagement with their leaders:

"... 'hiya' and 'utang na loob' are big in our culture. When a politician helps, we feel shy not to show appreciation or support later on. It's like an emotional tie that's hard to ignore, especially when the help feels personal."

However, findings also reveal inconsistencies among participants within the same community regarding how they describe their local leaders' support during fiestas. Some viewed their leaders as *very supportive*, noting their presence in fiesta events and sponsorship of activities. Meanwhile, other participants described them as *less involved or selective*. Here, P2 and P3 from the same city and same local government leaders share contrasting views:

"They're really supportive. Even after the election, we can always ask for their support. Mayor is always present in our celebrations. They were even treated as VIPs, seated at the front of the church."

Furthermore, as the participants reflected and hinted at suspected political motives behind a facade of service and responsibility, cynicism takes effect when not tempered by emotional resonance. P10 and P12 encapsulates this in their response when asked if they perceive their local government leaders' participation in fiesta activities as their fulfillment of their duties:

"...you will know who a true public servant is and who is not. Politicians who only appear during fiestas are present just for appearance's sake, unlike genuine leaders who are present and approachable even on normal days. That's how you know who's trustworthy and helpful to the community."

"I would say before, there was a wall. They're not really reaching out to the church... We have fiesta celebrations in our communities and we invite them, but they're not very participative."

"It's part of their responsibilities as local leaders to join the community fiesta. It is a demonstration of respect and appreciation to their people. However, they use it as a way to attract attention, appeal to people's trust by showing off as religious or God-fearing. I see it as a mix of their responsibility and personal interest."

These discrepancies in perceptions stem from power imbalances and varying social ties, where influence and loyalty shape both political

participation and public opinion. Shared community values and affiliations appear to steer the interpretation of fiesta politics where some view it as genuine service while others view it as performative displays.

This duality in emotional perception emphasizes the sophistication of the people as constitutionally endowed with suffrage. They take cognizance of how meaning lies in how people use and interpret actions and not in abstract definitions. Thus, fiestas sustain political trust through shared cultural interpretation while, on the other hand, also cautions to prevent the abuse of emotional resonance that political patronage aims to leverage on in order to remain.

DISCUSSION

The study explored the lived experiences and interpretations of the marriage of fiesta celebrations and patronage politics in selected communities in Metro Manila. It dwelt on how political actors in the person of elected officials utilize religious and culturally embedded language, symbols, and practices in fiestas in order to shape voter perceptions, how community members interpret these performances as part of their political experience, and how it is sustained through normalized exchanges of symbols and meanings. Employing Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language-games as a theoretical frame, the findings revealed that fiestas are not only religious and cultural gatherings but also as social arenas where political meaning is created, exchanged, and to some extent, weaponized. Consequentially, political patronage practices during fiestas are not merely transactional but deeply embedded in social norms, cultural traditions, and shared linguistic meanings that constitute a distinct form of life in Filipino fiesta politics (Rasiński et al, 2025).

Fiesta Politics as a Culturally Tolerated Reciprocity

A central finding in this study is that many fiesta-locus acts of giving, and participation are culturally embedded and socially legitimized. Donations, sponsorships, participation in Masses and processions, and carefully worded speeches have become part of a shared form of life. Such acts are intelligible as gestures of solidarity, mutual aid, and community belonging. This epistemology of fiesta politics aligns with Zarębski's (2023) analysis of Wittgensteinian philosophy on language-games where it is an embodiment of social relationships and contexts rather than abstract propositions. As these acts move in a language-game, their meaning is shaped by regular patterns of use and the social norms (rules) that make those uses intelligible to participants. This same cultural intelligibility sustains patronage practices, as gratitude and obligation make it difficult to distinctively isolate strategic patronage from genuine service (Hicken, Aspinall, & Weiss, 2019). The effect is that patronage becomes synonymous with reciprocity rather than cynical exchange.

The study buttresses the view that meaning is pragmatically grounded as political behavior becomes comprehensible (Rasiński et al, 2025) through ordinary acts of giving and belonging. Thus, fiesta politics emerges not only as a mechanism for political conditioning but as culturally legible discourse on solidarity which displays a communicative system where generosity and presence are publicly intelligible signs of leadership.

Fiesta Politics as a Tool for Manipulation

The findings further aided in discovering that despite its communal function fiesta politics operates as a strategic political mechanism. Politicians exploit the opportune timing and visibility to reinforce loyalty and influence over voter perception (Saguin, 2025). In place of perceiving, it as coercive, some of the participants described them as mutually beneficial exchanges; acts that sustain relational trust and

harmony—this then answered the question on how patronage practices are routinized and sustained in religious celebrations of fiestas.

In a study by Saguin (2025), he contends that effective policy and governance in the Philippines must consider the deep embeddedness of reciprocity within the purview of Filipino social relations. Similarly, Sadat and Basir (2025) supports this argument that patron-client relations persist not solely due to coercion or corrupt practices, which is usually found in the rural setting of clientelism, but they are pragmatically embedded in the everyday life, this then derives tangible and affective benefits for both parties.

This study asserts the language-game observed in its findings that the fiesta creates a context where generosity, obligation, and reciprocity form part of a normative grammar of politics. The participants' responses lauded politicians who are always present or assists in the physical aspects of fiestas. This goes on to demonstrate that political trust is established through ritualized consistency. Thus, visibility and active engagement are not neutral acts but essential linguistic expressions of trustworthiness within the local political form of life.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological inquiry into fiesta politics in Metro Manila illustrates how political meaning is generated and sustained through language, ritual, and shared cultural practices. Guided by the frame of Wittgenstein philosophy of language, the study demonstrates that domestic politics in the Philippine context is not purely transactional but involves linguistic and symbolic exchanges that must be within the purview of the shared cognizance of such symbols or gestures.

Fiesta politics operates in a language-game of determination of meaning. Through socially accepted acts of giving, attending, and serving, then is political meaning intelligibly produced. These acts inherit a purpose as speech within the political grammar of respect and belonging, which then sustains informal yet legitimate political relationships. Patronage politics persists through trust and cultural intelligibility. It is not perceived solely as a corrupt practice but as a moral economy that takes its root from cultural values such as debt of gratitude and solidarity. It is by following the cultural rules of the Filipino values that trust emerges and with it comes the expectation and responsibility of reciprocation.

As a theoretical contribution, Wittgenstein's political philosophy in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) offers a grammar of everyday politics. Applying Wittgenstein's philosophy to Philippine political culture brings forth how shared forms of life produce stable political meanings. Fiesta politics is a communicative practice where meaning and legitimacy are established through shared values and collective interpretation. Understanding fiesta politics in the Wittgensteinian lens deepened the narrative on cultural logic of patronage politics and the symbolic dimensions of democracy in the Philippines. It has broadened the grammar of politics as patronage politics permeated into the religious and cultural nature of fiesta celebrations which is an organic part of Filipinos.

While fiestas foster community cohesion and religious solidarity, it also provides a mechanism for political manipulation and soft corruption. This cultural tolerance of political patronage masks deeper political distortions that undermine democratic ethics and reinforce dependency. Such attempts to blur the boundaries of patronage and genuine service solidifies the pursuit to pose the corrupt nature of patronage and open it to moral ambiguity and ambivalence.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study acknowledges the several limitations related to its scope and methodological design. First, the research locale focused on selected urban communities in Metro Manila namely, Manila, San Juan, and Pateros. By focusing on these cities, it may not fully capture the dynamics of fiesta politics manifested in other urban locations and settings where socio-political structures and cultural practices may differ. Second, the participant pool primarily consisted of middle-aged community members and church volunteers which may limit the representation of perspectives from younger or older cohorts and those who are not involved in Church ministries. Third, the interviews were facilitated in a religious environment, and responses may have been influenced by ecclesiastical doctrines and the social desirability to align to them. Finally, the study does not aim for statistical generalizability; rather, it seeks analytic transferability, offering interpretative insights that may inform similar socio-cultural contexts where political patronage intersects with communal cultural traditions but not limited to fiesta celebrations.

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