

# **Exploring Class-Based Moral Perceptions on Local Governance: A Study of the Middle Class and the Rural Poor in Barangay Población, Malasiqui, Pangasinan**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research examines the existence and characteristics of ideological and moral divisions between the middle class and the urban poor in Barangay Poblacion, Malasiqui, Pangasinan. Based on Wataru Kusaka's "We vs. Them" framework and the Affective Polarization Theory proposed by Iyengar and colleagues, this study aims to explore how differing moral viewpoints among individuals influence the political beliefs of citizens, their engagement in community activities, and their trust or distrust in local government. The research employed qualitative approaches through semi-structured interviews on selected households from both social classes. Through thematic analysis, three major themes were elicited: class-based moral perceptions of leadership and governance; manifestations of moral antagonism within political discourse and participation; and perceived effects of moral and class divides on community cohesion and governance. Findings of this study shows that both classes develop internally formed narratives infused with their own moral judgments that justify their political choices while criticizing the values and actions of individuals in the opposing class. These narratives foster emotional polarization, resulting in a decline in trust and communication between the classes. While the study gives insights into the moral class divides, the qualitative approach does not allow for generalization. Future research may, therefore, incorporate quantitative methodologies to ensure more extensive representation and validate the patterns identified. The study avails the discussion in localizing moral politics to go deeper in the understanding of affective polarization in grassroots governance.

**Keywords:** Moral Politics, Affective Polarization, Class-Based Moral Divides, Urban Poor-Middle Class Relations, Local Governance Dynamics

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Democracy is yet a perplexing thing. As we all know, although it is said to uphold equality, freedoms and active participation, it still has its recognizable gaps and conflict. In the context of the Philippines for example, democracy allows and provides the citizenry a chance to influence the country's governance through the elections and other forms of participation. Elections that could influence the course of the nation's direction through leaders who represent citizens' values and aspirations. Yet, often, democracy promises to be tested through social cleavages, economic gaps and twists in ideologies. Such criticisms are endured even by democracies in today's world like that of the Philippines, where morality and ideology do not unite but increasingly split the political landscape into two halves. As an example of how democracy can widen the societal gulf, take for example the 2022 Philippine presidential elections<sup>1</sup>.

A study authored by Hipolao<sup>2</sup> argued that the contest between Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. and Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo revealed deeply entrenched moral and ideological differences among voters. Pro-Marcos narratives, often rooted in calls for national unity and economic resurgence, were juxtaposed against Robredo’s campaign emphasizing accountability and reform. However, the political discourse extended even beyond policy and leadership but also towards moral judgments. It is notable that during the most recent Presidential election, each camp was framing the other through binary labels such as “good” versus “evil” or “moral” versus “immoral.” Supporters of Robredo were frequently accused of elitism and condescension<sup>3</sup>, while Marcos Jr.’s base, on the other hand was often dismissed as misinformed or complicit in historical revisionism<sup>4</sup>.

Such moral framing had further exacerbated social class inequalities and strengthened the idea of a "we versus them" dichotomy in a way that transforms political loyalty into something that reflects an individual's identity and values. This meant one thing, that the division is not just based on class; it has gone beyond it, and it has developed into a more profound moral hostility in which political loyalty is seen as a gauge of one's own values. The 2022 elections, according to Hipolao, were different from previous elections because this year, the focus of the divide also covered wealth and education as voters' classification of what is "good" or "bad." This noticeable growing moral antagonism between classes then now reflects larger patterns of class division in Philippine society and raises concerns about how these differences and antagonisms truly affect the country's current political dynamics, especially during election seasons<sup>5</sup>. The stakes are higher than ever to try to grasp and comprehend this phenomenon, especially considering

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Hipolao, “Analyzing Antagonism in the Election of the Philippines Using Agonistic Democracy Paradigm,” *International Journal of Politics and Security* 5, no. 1 (March 11, 2023): 145, doi:10.53451/ijps.1210896.

<sup>2</sup> Hipolao.

<sup>3</sup> Maugan P. Mosaid, “THINK TALK: The Excruciating Defeat of the Opposition: What Went Wrong?” *MindaNews*, May 21, 2022, <https://mindanews.com/mindaviews/2022/05/think-talk-the-excruciating-defeat-of-the-opposition-what-went-wrong/>

<sup>4</sup> Michael Beltran, “Disinformation Reigns in Philippines as Marcos Jr Takes Top Job,” *Al Jazeera*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/29/disinformation-reigns-in-philippines-as-marcos-jr-takes-top-job>.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Hipolao, “Analyzing Antagonism in the Election of the Philippines Using Agonistic Democracy Paradigm,” 145–62,

recognized analysts like Richard Heydarian who declared the 2022 elections to be the most significant yet <sup>6</sup>.

Post-election discussions bespeak reflections by analysts such as those made Adorador on his discussions of mindsets of patriarchy, elitism, and local political power networks defined by the binary; that is, the supporters yowled against one another as rich versus poor, good versus bad, and moral versus immoral<sup>7</sup>. This moral framing has created political differences as measures of personal values leading to increasing moral antagonism and growing class divisions in the Philippines. This study explores the nuances surrounding these moral, class-ridden divisions. Even while many theories-McCoy's Strong Families-Weak State theory, Hutchcroft's Colonial Master-National Politics Framework, and Sidel's Bossism Framework-have been deployed to frame the affairs of Philippine politics<sup>8</sup>, Wataru Kusaka's moral politics angle adds new dimensions through which class and morality can be understood<sup>9</sup>. Kusaka's study of Manila's moral politics sweeps aside moral conflicts. It captures the "we versus them" dynamic that lay behind class distinctions within which politically fragmented perspectives are found<sup>10</sup>. Most interesting to the study is the way moral consideration drives the political activity and social divides.

In a nation where change is forever sought, the Filipino people, regardless of classes, will likely look toward a better Philippines, yet the paths they follow are very different, as these are shaped by their socioeconomic realities. The middle class, as had been analyzed by Casil <sup>11</sup>, is often characterized by the entrepreneurial ideals of 'homo economicus: the dream of self-reliance and upward mobility. For the working class, it is a different economic framework that works, focusing on near-term survival, rather than on future economic strategies. These differences in paradigm create not only moral but also ideological rifts, specifically in relation to political participation and governance. Political patronage networks, as presented by Teehankee and Calimbahin <sup>12</sup>, only exacerbate the rifts. Clientelism and clan politics that abound in local elections in the Philippines also accentuate moral and economic divides through establishment of dependency and thereby exclusion to them. These structures continue to intensify class-based inequalities and thus create blockages to political trust and cooperation between these classes, further intensifying ideological polarization between middle-class and lower-class groups. Such dynamics also draw critical questions on whether the moralizing of politics observed in urban

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Heydarian, "2022: Our Most Consequential Elections yet | Inquirer Opinion," *INQUIRER.Net*, May 3, 2022, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/152588/2022-our-most-consequential-elections-yet>.

<sup>7</sup> Daily Guardian, "Post-Election Analysis: Why Leni Lost in the Politics from Below," *Daily Guardian*, May 24, 2022, <https://dailyguardian.com.ph/post-election-analysis-why-leni-lost-in-the-politics-from-below/>.

<sup>8</sup> Luisito Dela Cruz, "Beyond the Classics: Identifying Gaps and Setting Trajectory in Understanding Political Dynamics in Philippine Local Politics," *Scientia - the International Journal on the Liberal Arts* 10, no. 2 (September 30, 2021), doi:10.57106/scientia.v10i2.135.

<sup>9</sup> Wataru Kusaka, "*Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor*," (NUS Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Wataru Kusaka, "*Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor*," 5-7.

<sup>11</sup> Vincent Casil, "Production of Homo Economicus in the Public Spheres of the Filipino Masses and Middle Class," *Scientia - the International Journal on the Liberal Arts* 11, no. 1 (March 31, 2022), doi:10.57106/scientia.v11i1.11.

<sup>12</sup> Julio C. Teehankee and Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin, *Patronage Democracy in the Philippines: Clans, Clients, and Competition in Local Elections*, 2022.

settings like Manila is also the same in rural contexts, or whether distinct provincial dynamics render possible alternative pathways to political engagement and governance.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Kusaka highlights moral politics in terms of establishing boundaries through moral referents between society groups, particularly in the way it conveys a "we vs. them" distinction<sup>13</sup>. This is a situation which fits the Philippine context very closely because in doing so, the framework points out how moral perceptions, which arise from class and socio-economic divides, directly influence political behavior and participation.

Moral divides are constructed between social groups mainly through an "us" and "them" dichotomy. A certain "them," in such cases, is often regarded as morally inferior or illegitimate. The example is even more pertinent in the Philippine setting since it signals how class and socio-economic divides would produce that most dissimilar moral narratives that greatly affect political behavior and participation. The conceptualization developed moralized class divisions at the core of societal conflict. The poor and middle class would usually stake out different moral grounds where each presumed itself as the rightful moral authority in the context of such misery. Different life experiences, different values, and different socio-economic realities determine these narratives, creating an aura of exclusion and competition for moral superiority. For example, the poor alone see themselves as a resilient and deserving backbone of the country, whereas the middle class hold their values of discipline and meritocracy as absolutely crucial in advancing the nation. The result of this moral divergence is the increasing dynamics in polarization, that obviously and noticeably solidify animosity against each other sides and erode opportunities for a constructive, rational, democratic dialogue. Rather than collaborating, it instead creates distrust and alienation, which ends up in a vicious cycle of conflict that defeats the core value of democracy.

Antagonistic framing over political choices is usually razed during electoral campaigns, turning elections into a moral battlefield rather than a space for constructive dialogue (especially online). It shows how deeply these moral divides impact governance and voting behavior. Moral framing of political decision consequences does not only affect the voting behavior of the individual; it also influences the way an individual interacts with the communities and views the legitimacy of the mechanism of governance. This process often results in silencing voices from marginalized groups, further entrenching inequalities and becoming roadblocks in the way of laying down more equitable political systems.

On the other hand, affective polarization theory by Iyengar et al.<sup>14</sup> complements Kusaka's theoretical framework because it deals with political divides in emotional and psychological dimensions. The theory states that, as far as political attitudes are concerned, polarization is not merely ideological but is dependent on emotions like:

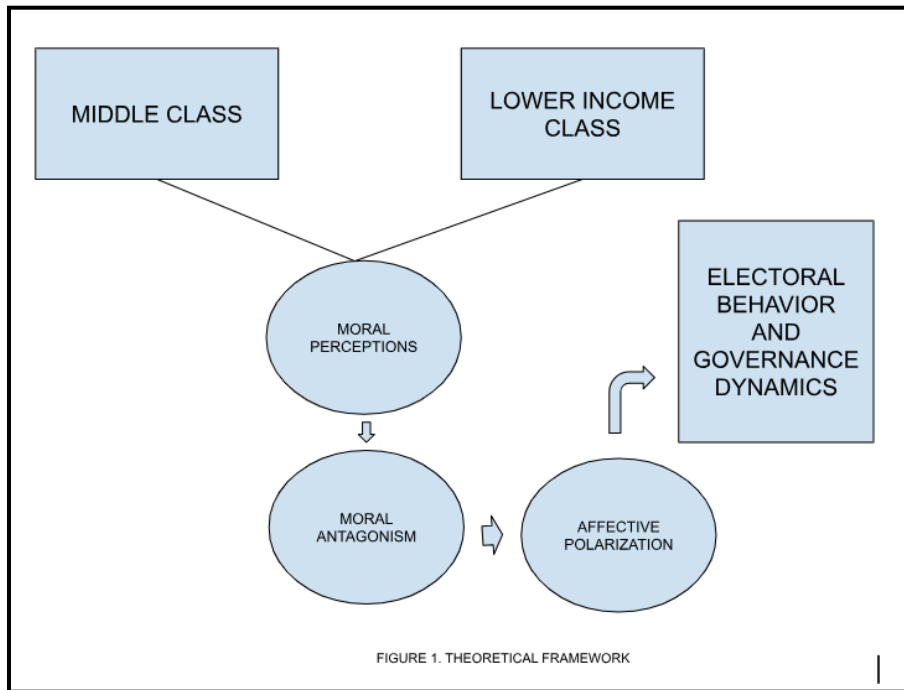
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<sup>13</sup> Wataru Kusaka, "Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor," 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Shanto Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (December 11, 2018): 129-46, doi:10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034.

- this solidarity and loyalty induce people to see their own group positively.
- negative feelings are usually generated by the 'other' group; these strong feelings, in turn, often lead to their stereotyping, rejection, and even dehumanization.
- the most frightening part is that these emotional divides translate into behaviors, such as voting behavior, social interactions, and political engagement.

Affective polarization has emerged as one of the most crucial and terrifying dimensions ever to afflict the modern political landscape, especially in democracy. This is in stark contrast to ideological separation: that is, the disagreements in policy or political ideology, while affective polarization revolves around interpersonal feelings and relationships outside of the ideological spectrum. Instead, it is characterized by developing escalated, negative feelings such as distrust, contempt, and even hatred between members of political opposition. Increasingly, opponents become viewed not as ideological foes but rather as morally pernicious, untrustworthy, and incompatible with their values.



The relationships among the key concepts are presented in a logical flow as follows:

1. Middle Class Perspectives and Lower Income class perspectives feed into Moral Perceptions.
2. Moral Perceptions influence Moral Antagonism.

3. Moral Antagonism leads to Affective Polarization
4. Affective Polarization impacts Electoral Behavior and Local Governance Dynamics.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative descriptive phenomenological methodology will be adopted to realize the objectives of this investigation. This design is particularly appropriate for an all-round and intensive study of this phenomenon from the participants' perceptions and experiences in their real-world setting through its focus on the unique dynamics of the case. This research design will be used to be able to capture the richness of subjective realities while at the same time affording an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of polarization.

Such is intended to enrich the experience of the study from an individual's perspective on how middle-class and the poor in Barangay Población perceive their roles, responsibilities, and challenges under local governance. The approach will provide nuanced understanding of the social dynamics in play as filtered through the prism of class-based identities and as shaped by such identities in terms of moral judgments, political behavior, and decision-making processes.

The method is also appropriate for illuminating affective polarization, where emotional and relational aspects such as mistrust, resentment, or solidarity show how these divisions/polarizations manifest within participants' political engagement. The study will analyze the interpretation that the participants give to leadership and governance in order to reveal recurring themes or common values or tensions between the two social classes and gain understanding on a broader scope about how the community dynamics play out.

This method suits a scenario where the researchers are interested in disclosing the actual affective polarization and its emotional and relational constituents like mistrust, resentment, or solidarity, which are crucial to comprehending how the divisions/polarizations are manifesting themselves in the political engagement of the participants. It will also enable the researcher to identify where the themes recur in the interpretations that the participants put on leadership and governance and what they have in common with or differences from the other social class in identifying values or tensions to give it a much broader understanding of the community.

## **FINDINGS**

The middle class in Barangay Población tends to view good governance as rooted in competence, discipline, and rule-following, while the rural poor emphasize approachability, empathy, and moral integrity in leadership.

Main theme	
<p>The middle class in Barangay Población tends to view good governance as rooted in competence, discipline, and rule-following, while the rural poor emphasize approachability, empathy, and moral integrity in leadership.</p>	<p>The middle-class view leaders as moral role models who embody efficiency and competence, while the rural poor prioritize leaders who are empathetic, fair, and provide practical, approachable support.</p>
	<p>The middle class tends to define moral leadership through competence, credibility, and effective governance, whereas the rural poor highlight a leader's empathy, humility, and sincere fear of God as key moral qualities that ensure just and compassionate service.</p>
	<p>While the middle class generally view the system as fair despite instances of favoritism, the rural poor feel marginalized and believe that access to services is largely determined by connections and social status.</p>
	<p>The middle class sees health, education, and long-term economic development as markers of moral governance, while the rural poor emphasize immediate livelihood support, employment, and aid for the marginalized as the true test of a leader's moral commitment.</p>
	<p>The middle class condemns vote-buying and patronage as forms of corruption and political immaturity, while the rural poor often see them as practical assistance and a morally justified response to enduring systemic neglect.</p>

Communities will often assess leadership in terms of performance and in terms of moral character. In Barangay Poblacion, Malasiqui, perceptions of what constitutes a "good" or "bad" leader-and therefore, a "good" or "bad" citizen-are profoundly influenced by class-based experiences and moral expectations. This section addresses how the definitions and evaluations of leadership and citizenship are mediated through moral lenses such as honesty, religiosity, generosity, and alignment (or lack thereof) with the interests of the people by the middle class and the rural poor. Often these moral parameters of judgment become the criteria through which political actors are either legitimized or vilified, depending on whether they are seen to embody or violate these traits. In throwing light on these conflicting moralities, we come to appreciate how such moralities cease to be a personal guide and effectively become a political tool to enhance class distinctions and engender affective polarization in local governance.

Both the middle class and rural poor in Barangay Poblacion have that innate feeling that moral leadership is, first and foremost, service-oriented and then, it has at its core, values of kindness, fairness, and a sincere commitment to the community. Socially, an ideal leader is viewed across the groups as trustworthy, approachable, and hardworking in assisting those whom he serves. However, enriching nuances of difference arise regarding the respective classes' framing of this moral ideal. The moral dimension accentuated in the moral leadership propounded by middle-class respondents finds its expression in some concepts such as efficiency, credibility, and competence. In their view, good leaders must also possess the ability to plan properly and deliver on their promises by virtue of education and experience. One

middle-class respondent articulated this viewpoint best: *“Dapat ang isang leader ay efficient; dapat efficient tapos may effective pa siya bilang namumuno”* (Respondent 1).

Another echoed the importance of credibility, noting that a leader’s moral standing depends on their capability to deliver on commitments, backed by education and experience by saying: *“Kredibilidad; ito iyong kakayahan niya na meron siyang... ito iyong kakayahan niya na gawin iyong mga bagay na ipinangako niya kasi meron siy nitong education at mayro'n siyang sapat na experience para makapag-lead ng mga tao”* (Respondent 12).

In contrast, rural poor respondents place greater moral value on approachability, empathy, and emotional accessibility. For them, a leader’s morality is measured by how well they relate to the everyday struggles of their constituents and their willingness to stand alongside the marginalized. As one respondent expressed, *“Yung para sa lahat, hindi lang para sa may kaya. Yung lider na makikinig, kahit wala kang pera o koneksyon”* (Respondent 11). Others emphasized fairness and impartiality, highlighting that a moral leader does not favor the wealthy or powerful but treats all constituents with equal care and respect.

*“Sa akin naman no, gusto ko yung maging lider ay yung pantay ang tingin niya sa mga nasasakupan niya. Wala yung may pinapanigan siya.”* (Respondent 4), *“Ang isang mabuting leader ay ano siya, fair siya sa lahat ng mga tao. Walang siyang pinipiling estado sa buhay kung sino ang kaniyang tutulungan o kung sino iyong mas bibigyan niya ng pansin”* (Respondent 12). The rural poor’s moral vision prioritizes leaders who show genuine concern and are ready to help in practical ways, reflecting a deeply relational and compassionate form of leadership. *“Kung ano yung kinakailangan ng mga mamamayan, andyan siya na handang tumulong. Parang yung ramdam mo yung service niya”* (Respondent 6) *“Pag halimabawa ma’am. Hihingi kami ng pabor mam. Kasi last year mam, pinapaalis kami dito mam eh. Syempre mam, di naman po kami nakakabala diba mam? Okay lang sana kung nakakabal, syempre, aalis din kami mam. Sana matulungan ang mahirap.”* (Respondent 7) *“Siguro, may malasakit sa kapwa at marunong magkisma [at] makibagay. Makamasa.”* (Respondent 9). Yet amidst such divisions, one aspiration unites the two categories of people: leaders who will bring about phenomenal and positive changes within the community. But whereas the efficient would regard the moral in terms of empathy-versatility, such moral expectations shaped by class will determine what aspects are valorized or condemned—a different kind of measuring stick for the attributes in their leaders.

In the eyes of the middle class and rural poor, there is a strong message that good leadership means orthodox religious morality. That is how informants tended to describe a moral leader in both segments: as someone who is "God-fearing," free from vices, and living a clean, upright life. The differences come out in the expression of this religious ideal.

In the case of middle-class respondents, most of the time this expectation of religiosity is accompanied by some pragmatic and results-oriented values. For example, just this middle-class respondent emphasized: *“Siyempre, dapat talaga religious. Tapos yung talagang maasikaso sa tao, at talagang naintindihan niya yung ginampanan niyang posisyon,”* highlighting that being fearful of God also involves a sense of responsibility and care to fulfill one’s duties in the community (Respondent 5).

Another respondent also stressed the importance of living according to God's teachings in the bible, stating that: "*Kasi kung alam mo ang turo ng Diyos, yun ay talagang pinairal mo. Yung sampung utos ng Diyos, pag pinairal mo yun, kahit wala na yung mga batas-batas na yan; o kaya dalawa lang yung pinakaimportante: yung mahalín mo ang Diyos at mahalín mo ang kapwa mo. Yun, pag pinairal mo yun, syempre di mo gagawan ng hindi maganda,*" linking religious morality to practical ethical behavior (Respondent 2).

In contrast, rural poor respondents rooted their moral expectations more deeply in spiritual and religious terms, often emphasizing humility, empathy, and sincere piety as essential traits that a certain leader must possess. One respondent said, "*Number one, may takot sa Diyos. Dahil pag may takot ang Diyos, takot gumawa ng masama,*" trying to cement the belief that fear of God naturally restrains people from doing immoral actions (Respondent 8). Another contrasted formal education with true moral behavior: "*Mas edukadong tignan yung mga taong marunong rumespeto ng tao kesa yung edukado na magaling mambastos. Akala nila natapos sila, mataas yung pinag-aralan nila, magsisimba sila pero kung tumingin sa tao, grabe silang mamaliit,*" highlighting that religious observance without genuine respect and humility is not sufficient (Respondent 4). This strong preference for piety, humility, and empathy among the rural poor illustrates how deeply religious norms shape their political morality, such that expectations rest on leaders who are spiritually upright as well as genuinely grounded in their lived experiences and struggles.

Together, these perspectives show that both social classes maintain the "God-fearing" image as a cornerstone of moral leadership, but from there, the middle class often links this idea with practical competence and public accountability, while the rural poor concentrate on heartfelt piety and empathetic humility. The fact that, even though the emphasis was varying, it was a common ideal shows how religious morality has been a potent moral and political language straddling class divides, enabling societal consciousness to reflect upon divergent lived realities.

A pronounced division emerges between the middle class and rural poor regarding perceptions of fairness and equal opportunity in local governance. While many middle-class respondents perceive fairness as generally upheld, albeit imperfectly, rural poor respondents overwhelmingly express feelings of exclusion, favoritism, and systemic inequality.

Among the middle class, fairness is seen as the norm. Most of the respondents from this class claimed that the local government efforts being practiced in the community is described as broadly inclusive. One middle-class participant shared, "*Oo. Kasi nakikita ko naman. Halos lahat ng sector equal. Especially yung sa maintenance hindi lang sa mahirap yung binibigyan niya. Lahat binibigyan niya kahit na nasa upper class, nasa lower, nasa middle. Lahat binibigyan niya lahat,*" expressing a certain view that resources and services are actually distributed fairly in the community (Respondent 1). However, even within this group, there is a recognition of underlying favoritism and social privilege. As one said, "*Kasi, I think, mas napapaboran, usually talaga, pag middle class ka, mas napapaboran kasi yung middle class,*" acknowledging the advantage that a middle-class status can confer (Respondent 10). One respondent added, "*Dito, kasi pagdating nalang sa trabaho, ma'am. I don't know if you observe this, pero when it comes to a job in every municipality. It is not what you know but whom you know,*". This answer points out that it is important to have connections when it comes to accessing opportunities especially within government setups (Respondent 3).

In stark contrast, rural poor respondents articulated a profound sense of injustice and marginalization being felt by their class. One participant bluntly stated, “*Kasi kung mahirap ka, mas lalong minamaliit ka. Mas tinitignan nila yung kalevel nila,*” reflecting feelings of discrimination that are present based on socioeconomic status (Respondent 4). Another shared, “*Yung gaya ng sabi ni Sir, mas napapaburan yung may mga kakilala na. Yung mga mahihirap, wala. Kay magkaiba talaga,*” further cementing how social networks privilege those individuals who have better means i.e. The working middle class (Respondent 6). The sentiment of unfairness was strongly voiced repeatedly: “*Hindi patas. Basta ang pinapaburan lang lagi yung may kaya. Nakikita ko ang pabor-pabor lalo na kapag may mga koneksyon. Ang may kaya, madaling ma-approve sa ayuda; financial. Yung ang main na problema talaga dito sa atin. Yung pondo ay para sa mahihirap pero hindi ito nararamdaman ng nakararami. Kung may kilala ka sa barangay, ikaw ang uunahin. Kung wala kang alam, bahala ka sa buhay mo,*” a deep distrust in the current system (Respondent 7).

Experiences of bias and exclusion extend to everyday encounters as well with local officials. One respondent observed, “*Sa government, yung mga empleyado, hindi patas yung tingin sa ano. Kumbaga, dapat pantay-pantay. Minsan nga, minsan, kung hindi ka nakabihis or ano, ayaw ka nilang interviewin, dapat hindi ganun,*”. Such experience highlighted discrimination based on appearance and status in the local area (Respondent 9). Another expressed personal experience of neglect: “*Hindi patas. Alam ko ‘yan kasi ilang beses ko nang naranasan. Parang ‘di kami priority kasi mahirap kami,*” articulating the moral pain of being deprioritized (Respondent 11). Even among those eligible for aid, unfair selection on government practices or programs breed resentment: “*Kung minsan kasi ang ano, kung sino yung talagang mahirap, sila yung parang totaling nabibigyan eh. Napipili. Pero hindi totaling program para sa lahat ng mahirap. Kahit na nandun ka na sa mahirap, pipiliin ka pa rin. Parang dapat, to be fair, alam mo nang mahirap lahat yan. Sama mo na lahat,*” calling for genuine inclusivity (Respondent 8).

These conflicting contradictions in views reveal a much deeper moral antinomy. Middle-class respondents, who are aware of the favoritism involved, regard monopoly as a reform cause, optimistic that it could be resolved: “*Oo, dapat kasi talaga pantay-pantay... Pero minsan may palakasan din.*” The poor rural eyes view the system as already rigged against them and the natural subsequent feeling to that would be alienation and disenfranchisement. “*Hindi, ganun din. Kasi kung mahirap ka, mas lalong nawawala ka.*” This clash brings to surface deeper class tensions, where justice itself becomes a moral battleground as shaping rules for governance and leadership are contested.

All social classes will have public health as the fundamentals and an economic livelihood as measures of a leader's moral responsibility. There is complete agreement among the middle- and lower-class respondents about the recognition that providing free healthy check-ups, free medicines, and free food programs and even economic support indicates that moral governance exists. A barangay officer captured this consensus, stating, “*Unang-una dyan, pamuhay. Pangalawa, dapat may libreng gamot at checkup.*” Likewise, a middle-class respondent emphasized, “*Priority dapat ang kalusugan at kabuhayan,*” emphasizing how public welfare remains a shared standard of morality or moral yardstick.

Among the middle class, health emerged as a top concern. One respondent said, “*Health. Tulad nito ni Kap, priority ang libreng gamot. Yung maintenance. Maintenance ng sa high blood,*

*ganun. Tapos cleanliness,*” the importance of accessible medical care and community hygiene. (Respondent 1). Another said, *“Kalusugan, edukasyon, at kabuhayan. Yun talaga ang ano... Pag nagkasakit yung ano, dapat may mapuntahan sila na center, gamot, hospital, dapat yun libre lahat,*” interconnecting health with education and livelihood as pillars of community well-being (Respondent 2). Another respondent explained, *“Sa amin yung ano, kalusugan ng community. Kasi diba, sabi nila, ‘Ang family, siya ang foundation ng isang community.’ Pag malusog ang mga tao... makakapag-isip sila ng anong ikakaganda ng para sa buhay nila, para din doon sa komunidad na kinabibilangan nila,*” illustrating how health supports or has a spillover effect into the overall social progress of the locale (Respondent 3). Simply put, *“Syempre, unang-una dyan, pamumuhay,*” summarized one participant, reflecting the centrality of livelihood to moral leadership (Respondent 4).

For the rural poor, while health is recognized as important, there is a more urgent demand for focused support on economic survival and aid targeted at the most vulnerable. One respondent noted this on one of the responses, *“Ako naman, bukod sa kalusugan, gusto ko ring pagtuunan ng pansin yung mga bayan niya. Yung dito, yung mga youth. Tapos yung mga mahihirap, dapat binibigyan ng pansin,*” emphasizing youth and marginalized populations (Respondent 4). Another added, *“Ganyan din po yung trabaho. Tapos mga indigency na dapat tulongan,”* highlighting the need for indigent support (Respondent 6). When asked about what should be the main priorities of government, a street vendor answered, *“Pag halimbawa mam. Hihingi kami ng pabor mam. Kasi last year mam, pinapaalis kami dito mam eh. Syempre mam, di naman po kami nakakabala diba mam? Okay lang sana kung nakakabal, syempre, aalis din kami mam. Sana matulungan ang mahirap,”* illustrating the precariousness of their situation and desire of those people who fall under this class for compassionate governance (Respondent 7). Employment was a repeated priority for both classes as well, with one stating, *“Ang dapat i-prioritize ng pamahalaan ay yung trabaho. Employment. Employment. Para sa lahat. Kasi once na nagkaroon ng trabaho, kahit na yung nasa baba, kahit pa paano, makakatulong yun sa ekonomiya,”* linking job creation with economic upliftment (Respondent 8). Another summarized the desperation, *“Unahin nila ang trabaho para sa mga walang-wala. Unahin ang hanapbuhay. Ang hirap kumita ngayon,”* prioritizing livelihood as the primary moral goal of governance (Respondent 11).

In consideration of all the responses, health and livelihood emerge as shared moral indicators by which leadership is judged. Yet, the rural poor’s prioritization of employment and direct economic aid reflects the immediate material challenges that shape their moral expectations from governance for their own survival, while the middle-class balances health with education and community well-being as measures of a leader’s moral worth.

Vote buying and political patronage are highly contested ethical issues that draw very different interpretations, mostly between the middle-class segment and the rural poor. These differences indicate an underlying moral divide between the two groupings in their perspectives on political engagement and legitimacy of political leadership.

Vote buying and patronage are largely condemned among the middle classes as morally corrupt practices that erode democracy. These are meant to be manipulative devices through which unqualified leaders gain power through various forms of transaction as opposed to merit or competence. One middle-class participant explained, *“Oo, pag sa middle..mataas ang*

*perception sa corruption, especially pag lagi silang nakikinig sa balita...sa facebook. Pero sa mga lower kasi, hindi na nila minimind yan. Ang iniisip na nila kasi, basta nabigyan sila or hanap buhay ba. Yung sa korupsiyon "pakialam ko diyan kung magcorrupt sila".* The middle class frames these kinds of behaviors as something exploitative. Meaning, politicians only “use” the poor for votes by offering immediate but unsustainable benefits or commonly called as “ayuda”. This frustration extends to voters who accept money or gifts in forms of ayuda, perceived as politically immature or easily swayed, feeding into an “us versus them” narrative. As one respondent put it, “*Simple lang 'yan. Yung mga mahihirap kasi, pag binigyan mo ng konting tulong, masaya na sila.*” Extending on this, the respondent said: “*Pero yung mahirap, kapag binigyan mo ng kaunti, masaya na. Kahit kapiranggot lang, parang tumama na sa lotto. At least, nakatawid siya ng isang araw.*”

Middle-class respondents also stressed the importance of ethical leadership, expressing dismay and disappointment that reform-minded leaders lose because they lack political “machinery” or refuse to engage in vote-buying. The middle class tends to believe that their private eye for information and resources allows them to engage better in well-informed, principled electoral choices. Alternatively, rural areas are filled with poor persons who tend to rationalize buyable votes and patronage as genuine kinds of help against a system that is reluctant to attend to their primary needs. Hence, support in some tangible form given by a politician is considered cropped help; here, personal connection—such as a leader who “shakes their hand” or “gives something”—is worth much more than paper credentials or long-term grandiose plans. One respondent shared, “*Kami, gusto namin 'yung lumalapit talaga sa amin. Yung makapag-abot samin ng ayuda paminsan minsan kasi tulong lang naman yun ma'am.*” Here, a pragmatic perspective becomes visible, where concerns about political corruption are overshadowed by immediate survival needs. Another went on, “*Sa middle class kasi, di ba, may pera naman yan... Kapag mahirap ka, kahit anong complain mo sakanila, wala kang magagawa kasi walang didinig o makikinig sakanila.*” Within the poor, a kind of fatalism sets in, one that begrudges the idea that such is corruption. “*Minsan sinasabi nila, 'Okay na, kahit corrupt siya. Lahat naman sila ganyan. At least, may natanggap ako,*” thus presenting a kind of moral calculation that gives precedence to the concrete (receiving benefits) over the abstract (citizens' right). On the one hand (for the rural poor), it has forged a pragmatic expression of political loyalty through a lens of reciprocity toward the giver, and on the other hand (for the middle class), it is seen as a tainted practice.

Such views create a mutual mistrust and moral hostility among classes. The middle class derides poorer voters as easily duped while the poor criticize the middle class as hypocritical or out of touch with the hard realities of life. As one respondent observed, “*Iyong mga lower middle class madali lang silang malinlang... Pero iyong middle class kasi hindi siya basta-basta natitinag, kadalasan sa kanila kasi iyong mga gumagawa pa ng research kung talagang qualified iyong isang politiko.*” The divide makes clear that political behaviors such as vote-buying carry with them profound moral significance created by an individual’s social position, lived experience and access to resources, furthering class-based views of political legitimacy and fairness.

These moral perceptions manifest as mutual distrust and judgment, with the middle class viewing the rural poor as easily manipulated and disorderly, while the rural poor see the middle class as arrogant, out-of-touch, and morally compromised.

Main Theme	
These moral perceptions manifest as mutual distrust and judgment, with the middle class viewing the rural poor as easily manipulated and disorderly, while the rural poor see the middle class as arrogant, out-of-touch, and morally compromised	Class-based moral stereotyping fuels a “kami vs. sila” divide, with the middle class viewing poor voters as irrational and easily manipulated, while the rural poor see the middle class as judgmental, out of touch, and morally hypocritical.
	Affective polarization deepens emotional hostility, as the middle class express frustration toward the “ <i>bobotante</i> ” mentality they associate with the poor, while the rural poor feel blamed, dismissed, and morally judged by a middle class they perceive as indifferent and elitist.
	The middle class views voting as a civic responsibility grounded in merit, platforms and qualifications, while the rural poor often approach it as a means of survival and recognition, valuing candidates who offer tangible, reciprocal support.

This theme addresses how class identities become imbued with moral considerations that profoundly affect not only political preferences but also emotional, ethical, and evaluative lenses through which Barangay Poblacion residents discern one another's political behavior. Class, in this connection, is no longer just an identifier of economic difference; it thereby becomes a yardstick for assessing righteousness, entitlement, and goodness in politics. People's ideas of morality, responsibility, and citizenship are filtered through their lived class experiences, leading to contrasting and often conflicting narratives about what makes a leader “good,” what counts as “proper”. In Kusaka's work on moral antagonism from the perspective of Moral Politics in the Philippines, we particularly see this dynamic manifested in how one class perceives not just the political choices of the other class but also the moral character they practice or possess that results in those choices. Evidence for this dynamic can be found in the observation of middle-class residents toward the political behavior of the rural poor in the chosen locale. In this regard, see their alleged vote-buying and material patronage as indicative of an overall failure to uphold democratic ideals such as merit, integrity, and programmatic governance. If, in fact, those are not seen as neutral or strategic choices but rather as morally compromising actions that "sell out" their future for present gain, then that particular framing allows for the impoverished to be positioned as accomplices to corrupt leadership and their poverty to be rendered as not just economic but political and moral.

On the other hand, the rural poor have their own moral framework, which generally stands on survival, relational accountability, and justice. Political decision-making is largely justifiable in the eyes of many, considering that individual relations or transactions for material gain are generally considered ethics based. By this standard, a leader is virtuous even if he does

not possess elite credentials, thus, the one who provides ayuda, the one who visits personally, or recognizes personal struggles. In contrast, this is how the middle class would usually put and position itself in justifying their stances: as judgmental or hypocritical—"hypocritically moralizing while unconsciously/consciously ignoring the material realities that shape poor people's political behavior." Consequently, there is a deep-rooted affective polarization wherein social class or status becomes a moral line. Tension is no longer about varying views on particular policies or styles of leadership; each class perceives the other as morally compromise, politically irresponsible, or even dangerous to the collective future. It is this type of moral antagonism that results in emotional distance and distrust, making cross-class cooperation difficult for the most part, especially on matters of local governance and electoral participation. Politics, therefore, is not simply contested; it comes with a morality attached, turning class differences into emotional and ethical divides that further makes an "us versus them" society.

Class-based moral stereotyping in the chosen locale highlights how intertwined political preferences are with judgments about character, values, and integrity. In the conducted interviews, respondents were all too quick to draw moral lines between different social classes, thus suggesting that class identity is not simply an economic one but also one of an ethical and emotional nature. These judgments reflect a wider pattern of moral hostility, whereby political behavior is seen not just different from one's own but as even an indicator of one's worth as a human being.

Within this framework, middle-class respondents tended to portray themselves as rational and responsible voters, with moral superiority attaching to their education and critical thinking. They heightened parameters of contrasting the rural poor as susceptible to manipulation, especially during elections, and even more so by some material incentive. As one interviewee recounted: "*Usually kasi, pag sa upper class hanggang middle, sabihin na natin na mostly may pinag-aralan yan. So alam nila kung sino yung iboboto nila... may critical thinking na. Tinitingnan nila sa isang leader yung qualifications, yung character. Halimbawa— (hindi ko naman nilalahat)—pag sa lower class, may mga botante kasi na kapag nabibigyan sila, especially pag malaking amount, sige, yun ang iboboto.*" (Respondent 1).

The implication is clear that informed voting is considered as a form of moral voting, and those who vote otherwise are portrayed as lacking both political maturity and ethical discernment (usually the urban poor). This perception was echoed when another middle-class respondent stated, "*Iyong mga middle class, sila iyong mga hindi madaling maimpluwensyahan... Meron silang sapat na edukasyon, meron silang kakayahan na intindihin iyong sistema ng gobyerno. Samantalang iyong mga lower income, hindi naman lahat nakakapag-aral kaya may mga pagkakataon na madali silang maloko.*" (Respondent 12). On this response, education becomes not just a marker of social class but also a form of moral capital and those who lack it are framed as vulnerable to deceit and incapable of sound political judgment. Such narratives often included subtle—and sometimes explicit—assertions of superiority. "*Yung iba kasi, as in talagang inaaral nila kung sino yung magiging leader. Parang sinasala nila,*" (Respondent 10) one said. Another added, "*Porket nakapagtapos o kaya may pinag-aralan, akala mo kung sino na.*" (Respondent 11). These statements reveal a classed understanding of virtue: the informed and strategic voter is good; the reactive and needy voter is flawed. On the other hand, rural poor respondents offered their own moral assessments of the middle class. These often portrayed them as indifferent to

poverty and detached from the daily struggles of ordinary people. “*Kasi ang mahihirap, ang sinisigaw nila talaga, yung makakatulong sa kanila,*” one explained, “*Pero yung mga middle class... mabibilang mo lang yung may pakialam.*” (Respondent 3). Another respondent noted, “*Kung middle class ka, talagang mababang pagtingin sa mga hirap. Hindi nila binibigyang pansin kahilingan ng mga mahihirap. Pero pag yung sa kapares nila na sa caliber nila, okay agad.*” (Respondent 4). These statements push back against the middle class’s claim to moral or intellectual superiority and rather, they argue that real moral value comes from showing compassion and being responsive towards the community and not necessarily from having the right credentials or qualifications.

In this view, the poor see themselves as grounded in an everyday ethics of care and survival. What matters to them are leaders who are present, who genuinely help, who listen—leaders who can show empathy. As one respondent put it, “*Yung mga gusto nila, yung feeling mabait sa kanila*”. For them, emotional connection isn’t just nice—it’s a meaningful, even necessary, part of choosing who to trust. What we see here is a deeper moral divide between classes. Both sides believe they’re doing what’s right, but they often view the other as wrongheaded—either naïve or self-serving. These aren’t just political differences; they’re emotional and ethical ones. And as Wataru Kusaka points out, this kind of moral clash—this moral antagonism—is what drives affective polarization even further.

Affective polarization in Barangay Población goes beyond just differing political views. It is fueled by intense emotional animosity that stems from frustrations tied to their respective classes. These emotional responses such as anger, resentment, and moral disappointment shows how people interpret political actions through the lens of their class identity. Among those in the middle class, feelings of frustration and moral outrage were particularly common, especially regarding political or election results that they believed were influenced by vote-buying or patronage. Clearly, there was a noticeable tendency to blame these unwanted outcomes towards the rural poor, often describing them as naive or easily manipulated. One respondent remarked, “*Iyong mga lower middle class, madali lang silang malinlang... Papakitaan lang sila ng kaunting kabutihan ng isang politiko, tapos sa tingin na nila ay mabuting lider na.*” (Respondent 12). Another echoed this moral judgment: “*Sa mga mahihirap... ‘Okay na, kahit corrupt siya. At least, may natanggap ako.’*” (Respondent 8).

The implication is that the rural poor trade long-term governance for short-term material gain, a transaction seen by many in the middle class as not just misguided, but ethically wrong. This moral disapproval is often accompanied by emotional detachment or contempt. “*Minsan yung mga tao, walang pakialam eh. Sa pagsunod naman sa batas, hindi pare-parehas ang ugali ng mga tao.*” (Respondent 2). The speaker conveys a widespread skepticism regarding civic obligation in this response implying that some groups’ incapacity or reluctance to “respect the law” is a sign of some sort of moral failure on the other person’s end. However, individuals who does not fall under the same category as them described a very different mental landscape. A psychological terrain characterized by bitterness, annoyance, and a feeling of helplessness because of their current social position. Their testimonies demonstrate how they see the middle class to be critical, uncaring, or involved in structural injustice. “*Kami, wala kaming kakampi. Kaya ang reklamo namin, hindi naririnig.*” (Respondent 7). This sense of isolation can also be found in other responses when Respondent 4 said: “*Kung middle class ka, talagang mababang*

*pagtingin sa mga hirap. Hindi nila binibigyang pansin kahilingan ng mga mahihirap.*” In these narratives, the middle class is not only perceived as morally arrogant, but at the same time, emotionally distant that is not capable of empathizing with the lived experiences and realities of those who live in poverty.

Economic power was also seen as a shield for political apathy. *“Sa middle class kasi, may pera naman yan. Kaya kahit anong corrupt nung mga nakaupo na, wala na silang pakialam. Ang importante sa kanila, maano yung negosyo nila.”* (Respondent 6). This sentiment suggests that the poor not only feel morally judged but also feel as sense of abandonment in the political process. Their complaints or requests, they believe, fall on deaf ears because they lack both economic leverage and political access in comparison to those who belong on other social classes. *“Ang hirap lang kasi, wala kaming boses sa taas. Dahil wala kaming boses, hindi kami napapansin. Pero hindi nila alam yung hirap namin.”* (Respondent 9). Further reinforcing this emotional divide is the perception of hypocrisy when one respondent claimed that: *“Ang middle class, kunwari kontra-korapsyon. Pero pag kapatid nila o kaibigan ang may posisyon, tahimik sila.”* (Respondent 7) reflecting a disillusionment with what is seen as selective morality. Meaning, a situation where the middle class denounces corruption only when it is politically convenient for them. The emotional toll of these perceptions is heavy especially when many rural poor respondents spoke of feeling blamed for the nation’s problems. *“Yung iba kasi, porket nakapagtapos o kaya may pinag-aralan, akala mo kung sino na... kami ang laging pinipintasan. Akala mo kami ang dahilan ng lahat ng problema sa Pilipinas.”* (Respondent 11).

These expressions of pain and alienation show that affective polarization does not just create political disagreements but also creates a deep emotional divide or walls between the two classes. People don’t just argue; they stop connecting. They stop caring. Over time, this emotional disconnection leads to disengagement and even despair.

When people can’t—or won’t—empathize across class lines, it feeds a cycle of blame, distrust, and inaction. Both sides feel shut out. The middle class frequently believes it is ethically correct yet helpless to make any changes. The impoverished, however, feel excluded from the political discourse, misunderstood, and condemned. Collective action is practically difficult in such an environment, not just due to structural obstacles but also because individuals no longer view one another as allies or even as belonging to the same community. Rather, they view one another as a contributing factor to the issue rather than its resolution.

Both middle-class and rural poor people view voting as a moral form of political engagement, however, their expectations and practical experiences differ greatly. Each class's definition of good leadership, assessment of what a good leader may be, and their reaction to how the electoral process should be done are influenced by these disparate moral frameworks that both classes hold.

In this regard, voting or exercising a person's right to suffrage is seen by middle-class respondents as a form of civic obligation that should be based on a certain candidate's competence, reason, and moral leadership. Many assert that they evaluate qualifications, carry out study, do their individual researches, and base their votes on long-term goals or platforms for advancement instead of considering candidates with widespread "masa appeal" triumph via

performative empathy, giveaways, or celebrity status. *“Yung sa middle class, kasi talagang... nagre-research, tinitingnan yung credentials ng leader na gusto nila.”* In contrast, rural poor respondents often frame voting through the lens of survival and recognition. They value candidates who show up such as those who physically visit their communities, shake their hands, and offer tangible assistance such as money or even grants. These acts, though dismissed by others as patronage, carry moral weight for this class especially if they are living in a system that consistently fails to serve them.

This contrast reveals what scholars call a moral economy of voting where the poor’s decisions are not necessarily uninformed or passive but rooted in a more practical form of reciprocity and gratitude. And although the middle class may view this as something that is corrupt or irrational, for the poor, it is often their only form of agency or access to aid.

Still, disillusionment cuts across both groups, albeit in different emotional tones. Among the middle class, there's a sense of cynicism about the system that includes frustration over political dynasties, machinery, and voters they perceive as easily swayed. Among the poor, the disillusionment is quieter but deeply personal and is done through a form of resignation to the idea that no matter who wins, their conditions remain unchanged. Elections, for them, feel like a cycle of false hope.

Ultimately, both classes engage in politics with moral intent — but judge each other harshly. The middle class sees the poor as “easily fooled”; the poor see the middle class as hypocritical and out-of-touch. This fuels moral antagonism, where the “other side” is not just mistaken, but morally misguided. The result is a deepening affective polarization that threatens not only electoral legitimacy, but also the broader democratic spirit. Unless addressed through more inclusive, empathetic, and class-conscious governance, this fractured moral universe will continue to produce mutual distrust, political alienation, and a democracy disconnected from its citizens' lived realities.

Differing moral perceptions between the middle class and rural poor foster mistrust and selective engagement with local government, as each group views leadership legitimacy through conflicting moral lenses.

Main Theme	
Differing moral perceptions between the middle class and rural poor foster mistrust and selective engagement with local government, as each group views leadership legitimacy	The middle-class places conditional trust in officials based on competence, performance, and fairness, while the rural poor base their trust on personal familiarity, direct benefits received, and whether past promises were fulfilled.
	Disillusioned by the absence of meritocracy, the middle class withdraw from civic engagement out of frustration, while the rural poor often disengage due to feeling unheard and powerless, participating only when incentives are present.

through conflicting moral lenses.	Class and moral-based conflict is marked by mutual resentment, with the middle class blaming the poor for perpetuating corruption, while the rural poor resent the middle class for moralizing from a place of privilege and overlooking their lived struggles.
	For the middle class, moral language serves as a tool for asserting legitimacy and assigning blame, while for the rural poor, morality is grounded in empathy and survival, with any sense of unity often fleeting and limited to post-election periods.

Moral and class divisions have very much played major and contentious roles in shaping the collective dynamics of Barangay Población. The residents, in their interviews, spoke of how such divides affected not only the choices made by individuals on their political stand but also the capacity of the community-as-a-whole to trust, cooperate, and engage in local governance. Middle-class differences with the rural poor cut more than just economically; they were filled with notions about values, motivations, and credibility-particularly with regard to perceptions of leaders and public service applications and perceptions of each other. These moral perceptions—who is deserving, honest, or self-serving—have been some powerful lenses through which to interpret and experience governance. Participants reflected on how such perceptions colored everyday interaction and decisions at the barangay from voting behavior and access to public services to attendance at community meetings and reactions to barangay projects. For many, political engagement was not simply constructed by policy platforms or candidate qualifications; it was instead more the deeper perception of fairness, responsiveness, and alignment with their personally lived reality that swayed investments in political action. In such a context, mistrust would be shaky, conditions for cooperation would be laid, and on the whole notion of a single community would become increasingly difficult to hold on to.

Counted as fragile and provisional, trust in their officials emerges as reflections of the deeper moral evaluations and lived realities within a community. Middle-class and rural poor respondents assess their leaders not only on material ends but on the perceived moral character of the individual-these include characteristics like fairness, transparency, consistency, and sacrifice.

Trust amongst middle-class respondents is quite often not sure and carefully measured. It is based on the observed efficiency and effectiveness, yet counters that with an ever-watchful skepticism. So, these people expect from leaders that they should show that they are competent at doing things and delivering promises; otherwise, the trust is easily lost when political decisions seem arbitrary or unjust. For instance, Respondent 1 captures this conditional trust:

*“Ah, ano..makikita mo naman sa isang lider kapag ginagawa niya yung isang trabaho niya eh, nakikita mo naman kung efficient siya and effective, siguro yung tiwala mo mabibigay mo yung hanggang sa 80 to 90 percent. Pero pag ang isang lider na hindi mo makikita yung katangian na gusto mo skanya, hindi mo siya pagkakatiwalaan.”*

This is pragmatic analysis because trust is linked directly to visible performance yet qualified by the leader's moral attributes. Respondent 3 manifests the frustration occasioned by

an abrupt cutting off after long years in community service, revealing how deeply one can injure trust through political retaliation:

*“Parang wala na. Parang sa ratings ang baba na muna. 50-40 gano'n. Isa pa, masakit sa amin na kapag hindi mo napuntahan o nakuha ang gusto nila, parang wala na kaming halaga. Alisin na lang kami bigla, kahit 11 o 12 years na kaming nagseserbisyo. Dati pa kami barangay population workers. Family planning? Ilang taon na rin kaming nandiyan. Tapos gano'n lang? Bigla-bigla na lang aalisin.”*

This undermines confidence in leadership and makes feelings of marginalization and injustice. It is also indicative of how trust is linked with perceived fairness and respect. Trust is the ambition of the experience: Respondent 10 trusts on a personal vote but is unsure about a complete impact that comes with the actions of officials.

Respondent 10's ambivalence — trusting based on personal voting but uncertain about the full impact of officials' actions — highlights how middle-class trust is grounded both in personal agency and cautious skepticism:

*“Ako is based sa experience ko, feeling ko nasa 50-50 ako na pinagkakatiwalaan kasi bumoto din naman ako. So, nasa 50% na pinagkakatiwalaan ko silang makakapag, or makakatulong sa community. And then, 50% doon kasi, syempre, hindi naman natin alam yung total din na ginagawa nila, kung nakakatulong ba talaga sila.”*

With Respondent 12, however, most of their distrust is not pure hatred but rather a critical observation of the deficiencies of leadership with regard to political knowledge and capabilities: *“Hindi ko naman sila gaanong pinagkakatiwalaan pero hindi rin naman ako talaga hate na hate sa kanila pero kasi may mga pagkakataon na marami silang pagkukulang na sa tingin ko hindi pa sapat iyong ginagawa nila, iyong knowledge nila about sa politics hindi pa iyon akma sa expectations ko para sa isang lider.”*

In contrast, rural poor respondents started off with a higher baseline trust, especially those directly in community service like barangay health workers. In this system, familiarity is strongly linked to concrete benefits and service delivery: *“Sa ngayon, nakabase po ako sa pangako nila. Dapat tuparin po nila yun. Kaya po sila niluklok diyan sa kanilang kinalalagyan ngayon.”* (Respondent 6) For them, tangible evidence, quite literally in this case watertight, such as distribution of medicines backed by receipts, deepens trust. But it is a precarious trust that declines sharply whenever promises break or corruption shines through, thus showing that at least a transaction happened there. *“Yung dito mam, okay lang naman. Pero kasi mam, pare-parehas lang naman sila. Wala kang pagpipilian Talaga.”* (Respondent 11) This resignation reveals how socio-political constraints influence trust, fostering acceptance not out of genuine confidence but because of lack of alternatives.

Overall, trust in local officials is not merely a function of performance or promises; it is deeply embedded in moral judgments shaped by class experiences and political realities. For the middle class, trust involves weighing leaders' competence, integrity, and respect for fairness—any deviation invites skepticism or disengagement. For the rural poor, trust is closely tied to the delivery of basic services and the fulfillment of promises, yet it remains vulnerable to political manipulation and unmet expectations. Political retaliation or exclusionary practices, like the removal of long-serving community workers, significantly undermine trust by signaling

unfairness and eroding community bonds. Moreover, while some resign to a lack of real choices, others maintain a critical, if cautious, stance toward leadership, revealing varied ways moral evaluations fuel both trust and affective polarization within the community.

A pronounced pattern that seemed to be common on both the middle-class and rural poor respondents is their tendency towards political disengagement that is manifesting in voter abstention and lesser to non-participation in community assemblies. This withdrawal is largely rooted in their moral disillusionment, the sense of disappointment and loss of faith in local to even national leaders' integrity and sincerity when it comes to serving the people. Respondents consistently pointed out things such as broken campaign promises, recurring corruption, and perceived futility as powerful forces that sap their motivation to participate in democratic processes deemed useless.

Among the rural poor, this disengagement takes a distinctly pragmatic form. Many respondents from both classes admitted that community meetings are largely ignored or unattended unless there's an initial announcement of material incentives, such as 'ayuda' being distributed after the gathering. This form of transactional nature of their political engagement just proves more how immediate material needs overshadow the more abstract notions of civic duty or their democratic participation as a part of this political community. One respondent noted: *"Ayaw nila yung tumatakbo kaya di na sila bumuboto...kapag nagpatawag ka ng assembly o meeting, hindi sila pumupunta. Pero pag ayuda, kung ala una ang time, alas dose nandyan na...dapat kahit walang ayuda."*

In the case of disengagement among the rural poor, some see material incentives as a basic rationale to participate. Unless there is some form of 'ayuda' for the poor, most admitted to neglecting those meetings. This way of forging political engagement shows the primacy of immediate material needs over the idea of civic duty or democratic participation. One of them noted that: *"Usually kasi napapansin ko...hindi niya nakukuha o hindi naririnig yung boses nila."* This sense of exclusion reflects a deeper breakdown in political representation, where the moral legitimacy of leadership is questioned not only in their actions but in their responsiveness to constituents' voices. Disillusionment is also tied to alienation where for them, neither candidate really speaks for the community nor offers the prospect of meaningful change. From this perspective, elections just appears to be an exercise in choosing between two equally flawed options; a battle of choosing the lesser evil, thus providing justification for many to abstain from voting: *"Siyempre marami yung mga tao ganyan na talagang hindi naniwala. Yung iba hindi na bumuboto dahil wala na silang paniniwala sa mga pangako ng mga kandidato...parang okay lang po, wag magboto. Nakakatamad bumuto kasi pare-parehas lang yan."* This affects some broader feeling of disengagement, whereby the loss of trust in political actors translates into an almost immediate feeling of futility with respect to voting. Others contend that disengagement arises from frustration stemming from internal conflicts and external interference with community decision-making that not only divides them but never creates any opportunities for unity or a dialogue:

*"Siguro. May mga incidents na nangyayari talaga na hindi lahat nagkakasundo sa barangay... pag may nakialam na iba, hindi na nila maahisip...Yung ningas ng uling, mas lalo bumalaki."* This analogy shows that external meddling, instead of lessening conflict, actually aggravates local tensions, further disincentivizing collective action or participation. Some other informants do recognize that political disengagement is a problem and that participation is the

responsibility of the community; however, this realization often comes with a sense of resignation: *“Para sa akin, hindi naman siya tama, 'di ba? dahil lahat tayo parang it is our responsibility na makialam. Iyon.”* This tension illustrates the complicated emotional terrain of participation, where moral disillusionment breeds withdrawal even as the cherished idea of civic duty beckons.

Disengagement from voting and community meeting attendance can thus be seen as a coping mechanism for moral disillusionment manifest in the deteriorating faith of leader integrity and democratic processes. This disengagement goes beyond mere apathy that is rooted from deep feelings of betrayal, unresponsiveness, or unmet basic material or moral needs. Looking at the broader sphere, it also signals a crisis in both political representation and legitimacy of elections, revealing that without renewed trust and genuine inclusion, democratic participation risks continued decline across different social groups.

In the interview, the responses reveal that, in the community, political conflicts are not merely interests clashing with interests or matters of policy; one is confronted with moralized class identities. Such moral contrasts deepen the social divide; for the middle class and rural poor not only disagree on political matters but each fundamentally questions the other's character, values, and legitimacy as political actors.

While the rural poor see the middle class as arrogant, judging them by values of their own making, the political choices of the poor are condemned as ignorant or irrational, a condemnation so succinctly conveyed in the term “bobo” or “bobotante.” This is not merely denigration, the bobo engenders a moral denigration that, on the one hand, strips the poor of their agency and dignity in political matters and, on the other hand, represents the middle-class attitude toward the entire rural populace. In the minds of the middle classes, they are electoral agents whose purported votes are meaningless or bought for a pittance by the State, a patron-client exchange, denying the real-life dilemmas pertinent to their voting behavior. One respondent’s articulation captures how this moral framing is :

*“Middle class ay mahirap kasi nga po, iba yung perception nila... Si middle class naman po is parang, ay, ang bobo nyo kasing bumoto.”* This stigmatization against the poor is far-reaching because this derogation translates itself into an emotional wound. To have one's voter status morally delegitimated casts the person into feelings of alienation and exclusion from the political community. The poor feel to be dismissed, not just economically bound, but also morally so; as if their electoral choices are fallacies, wrongs, or unworthy of respect. Conversely, middle-class respondents express their own moral grievance: they see the poor as responsible for perpetuating corruption by supporting patronage politics. This framing casts the rural poor as complicit in the breakdown of good governance through what is perceived as uncritical or transactional voting. The middle class’s moral outrage is grounded in a belief that the poor’s political behavior sustains a corrupt system that ultimately harms the entire community:

*“Mayroon. Hindi mawawala yan every time na magkaroon ng eleksyon... Si mahirap, sasabihin ng mga middle class, ay bobo kayong bumoto.”*

This reciprocal moral antagonism functions as a barrier to empathy and mutual understanding. Each group’s moral framing of the other simplifies complex political realities into binary categories of “ignorant” versus “irresponsible,” obscuring the structural conditions—such as poverty, lack of education, and unequal access to information—that shape voting behavior.

Social media emerges as an accelerant of this polarization. The easy spread of misinformation and fake news intensifies distrust and entrenches polarized moral narratives. This technological dynamic amplifies existing fissures, making reconciliation more difficult: *“Hindi pareparehas ang pag iisip ng isang tao kaya ganun. Tsaka malaking efect din yun social media. Madali maniwal sa mga fake news.”* Furthermore, the perceived inequity in government responsiveness deepens the class divide. Rural poor respondents observe that their urgent needs are often sidelined or delayed compared to the more immediate attention given to middle-class requests. This differential treatment is not only practical but symbolic, reinforcing a narrative of systemic neglect and exclusion:

*“Kung minsan halimbawa yung mahirap, may gusto sa pamahalaan... Pero pag yung middle class ang humingi ng kung ano-ano, action agad. Pero sa mahirap, wala.”*

This experience of exclusion fuels a moral narrative of injustice and victimhood among the poor, exacerbating feelings of distrust and resentment toward local officials and the middle class alike. The cumulative effect of these moralized class divisions is a deepening affective polarization that shapes social relations and political engagement. The polarization is “affective” because it involves emotions such as contempt, resentment, and alienation—not just ideological disagreement. It fractures the community’s shared political identity, undermining solidarity and making cooperative governance more difficult.

Lastly, the sense of resignation expressed by some respondents highlights the broader consequence of this moral polarization: political disengagement and fatalism. The belief that complaining or contesting electoral outcomes is futile further weakens democratic participation and reinforces the cycle of mistrust and alienation: *“Kung sino nanalo wala ka naman na magawa kaya bakit ka pa magreklamo, diba?”*

In sum, the interplay of class and morality in these divisions reveals how political conflict in the community transcends material interests and becomes a contest over moral legitimacy. Both groups struggle to see each other as legitimate political actors, trapped in a cycle of moral judgment and reciprocal blame. These dynamic poses significant challenges to building inclusive local governance and restoring trust in democratic processes.

Moral beliefs possessed by the residents of Barangay Población serve a dual-edged purpose: creating division while simultaneously uniting the people. Most of the respondents believe that it is during elections that more apparent and deeper differences in their moral conviction are surfaced and manifested because of the prevailing political loyalties cast in emotionally charged competing narratives of moral rightness and victimhood. During elections, they further explained, people often justify their support for candidates based on who appears more “awa-inspiring” or morally upright in their eyes. This tells us that the choices made during elections are not only strategic considerations but are also heavily influenced by, in fact proxying the level of trust and empathy in the community, moral evaluation:

*“...ipagtatangol pa nila yung masama. Tapos ang nagiging kaso, sino ang mas ‘kaawa-awa,’ siya ang tama.”* On the other hand, it should be mentioned among the respondents that after elections, the community generally returns to a more cooperative and peaceful situation, with fewer visible signs of open conflict or political confrontation. However, they also noted that hidden underneath usually are the remaining resentments, particularly when the

elected leaders fail to meet expectations. This situation presents an unstable social cohesion that gives a false appearance of divided long terms:

*“...pagkatapos ng eleksyon, tahimik na sila, nakikisama na kung sino yung nanalo kahit hindi sinuportahan.”*

Interestingly, some respondents offered a more nuanced view of morality as rooted not in abstract ethical principles but in shared lived experiences and struggles. One respondent insightfully highlighted that people sometimes defend leaders with questionable morals because they empathize with their personal hardships:

*“Yung iba, di na nag uusap talaga kasi minsan, di naman sila nakikinig tapos ipagtatangol pa nila yung masama.”*

In this view, considerations of ethics are fused with social empathy and solidarity shaped by class-based realities and communal histories, rather than detached ethical reasoning. And this very kind of view helps in explaining why such divisions about moral issues are so potent and so difficult to resolve: they embody identity and shared narratives of social groups." The disparate moralities posed by class enable definitions and evaluations of governance, justice, and leadership to differ. There are differences between the middle class and the rural poor—their differences are not only economic but also moral; what each group considers just or legitimate governance reflects its own social position and shared memories of inclusion or exclusion. This moral pluralism generates both schism and possibilities for dialogue, the latter of which another respondent believes is necessary for leaders to build common ground through listening to myriad community perspectives:

*“Dapat ikaw din na nakaupo, aware ka sa pananaw nila, mapakinggan mo para malaman mo kung ano yung nanapitan mo... Pag nagkaroon ka ng conclusion mo doon sa naririnig mong mga pananaw, gawa ka ng hakbang para sa pagkakaisa.”* Some respondents made mention of the moral stance being at times a sort of blackmail, this way saying that appeals to victimhood ("kawawa kami, kaya kami ang tama") have a moralizing impact that ironically hurts good governance: the shared sense of moral superiority by all sides.

Such dynamics damage trust and impede cooperative governance, contributing to a political climate where social unity is fragile and easily disrupted by moralized conflicts.

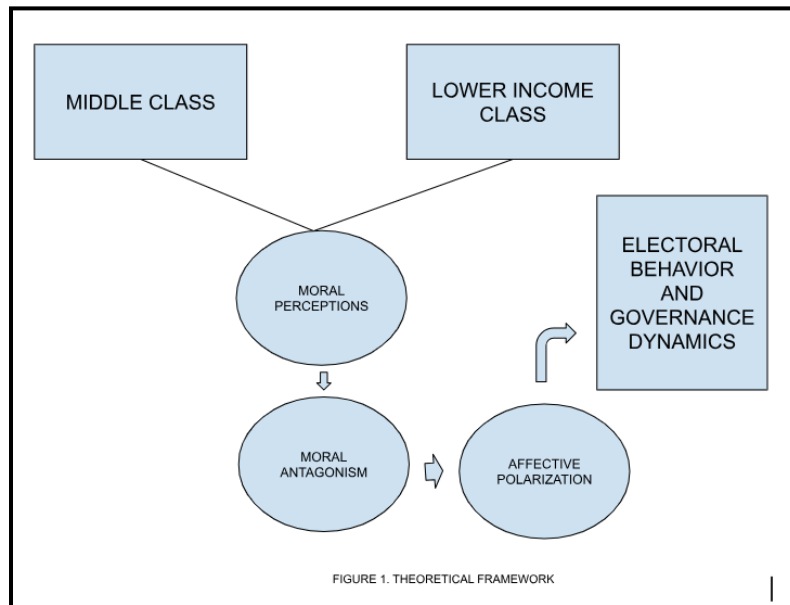
It is to be considered that some of the respondents believe that moral discourse could indeed have a positive impact on governance, with the compromise being that criticisms of politicians must be tempered with acknowledgment of their achievements so that these processes might promote accountability and constructive reform.

*“Nakakatulong iyong mga ganito, kumbaga debates... may mga mag-critique sa politiko at meron din sasabihin positibo na nagawa nito... Nagkakaroon ng balance.”*

Rather, this suggests that the moral claim would be a unifying mechanism if directed toward discourse based on the polarity of reasonableness for duly constructing its maxim. The findings indeed show morally based actions in Barangay Población work dialectically: it divides in reaffirming parallel social and class boundaries yet undergirds empathy, dialogical engagement, and political participation if acknowledged and respected despite differences. A

significant challenge for local governance would be to turn these moral divides from being conflictual sources to pathways of inclusive community-building and shared responsibility.

## DISCUSSION



The first and foremost research question—What are the differing moral perceptions of the middle class and the rural poor in Barangay Población, Malasiqui, regarding local governance?—uncovered a rich tapestry of shared moral ideals and class-differentiated moral emphases. While both the middle class and the rural poor hold such values as honesty, religiosity, and fairness as the foundation of everything expected of an ideal leader, these terms and the values attached to them take on variants with a differential emphasis according to class.

Middle-class respondents seemed to give weight to leadership moral imperatives like delivery, educational qualifications, openness to scrutiny, and technocratic adeptness. They see good governance as the moral quality and competence of the leader. The middle class sees morality in terms of how well a given leader delivers programs and commands trust driving the leadership style to respect the law and avoids manual corruption. Here, these perceptions resonate with liberal democratic ideals that are often elevated in middle-class rhetoric, ones that privilege programmatic politics and institutional integrity.

On the contrary, in rural poverty, the respondents foregrounded, among others, empathy, approachability, and a sense of relational responsibility as moral markers. There, it is based not on being good at planning or on rhetorical brilliance, but rather on actual response to everyday needs—health, livelihood, and interpersonal connection. Thus, morality is located in the very mundane lived experiences of governance: does the leader spend time in her community? Does she listen? Does she offer help, however modest? For the rural poor, it is moral governance they refer to.

Different standards attest to the first link in the study's conceptual framework:

Class-Based Perspectives → Moral Perceptions.

These also give credence to Wataru Kusaka's argument that moral categories in the Philippine politics are not universal but socially situated. What is understood as 'moral' is conceived differently by different social groups considering their standing in the social stratification as well as degree of political (dis)empowerment.

Research question number two—How do these moral perceptions manifest between the middle class and the rural poor in Barangay Población, Malasiqui? —There, morality created fissures between the classes internal to otherwise evaluative perspectives on governance, culminating in what Kusaka identified as moral antagonism.

It is true that middle-class respondents consider lower-class political behaviors in the rural setting—most especially their attitude towards clientelism and vote-buying—as indicative of immature and irresponsible participation in politics. Such behavior is not seen as a survival tactic adopted by poor people but simply viewed as a moral deviation from democratic ideals. The poor are perceived to have the capacity to corrupt while failing to understand what their electronic selection actually entails in the long run.

The rural poor respondents, on their part, see such judgments as elitist, unsympathetic, and protesting too much on moral grounds. They argue that vote-buying and political patronage may be imperfect but constitute opportunities for reciprocation in a system which otherwise ignores their needs. For these poor, accepting assistance at the hands of politicians is not a betrayal of politics but is morally relevant and defensively subversive in a structurally unequal system. They often viewed middle-class moralizing as detached and hypocritical, particularly when it came from people who had access to more stable economic and social resources.

This misunderstanding is founded on Kusaka's theory of moral politics where the different moral worlds are not only contradictory but also mutually delegitimizing. The process is aggravated by the fact that one party, typically the middle class, universalizes its moral logic and then criticizes the rest as irrational or "bobotante."

These perceptions allow emotional polarization—contempt, anger, and blame—to set in, mirroring the Affective Polarization Theory of Iyengar et al. However, in the Philippines, this process is driven not by partisanship, as in the U.S., but mainly by class. This finding builds on a growing body of literature which views polarization not only in terms of ideology but also as fundamentally moral and affective, arising out of emotional responses to perceived moral failings in others.

This brings us to the second and third phases in our conceptual framework:

Moral Perceptions → Moral Antagonism

Moral Antagonism → Affective Polarization

The answer to the third research question: How do differing moral perceptions between the middle class and the rural poor influence the community's engagement with and trust in local government? Later on, establishes how moral antagonism and affective polarization undermine trust in civil society, as well as political participation, and the legitimacy of governance.

It shows that trust in local government officials across both classes is conditional but, nevertheless, follows deep moral reasoning; middle-class respondents judge based on competence and delivery of promises, while the rural poor based their trust upon empathy, direct

interaction, and symbolic acknowledgment. Expectations in forms of broken promises, political vendettas, and favoritism erode trust further, with the rural poor perceiving these acts as neglectful of their role and the middle class viewing them as a form of disillusionment.

These perceptions contribute to political disengagement that manifests in their participation in elections and an attendance deficit in barangay meetings. Disengagement from the rural poor, however, is usually pragmatic-e.g., "why attend if there is no ayuda? -" not merely symbolic of deeper alienation. But from the middle class, that disappointment in political engagement comes from perceived rigging of the system in which even the informed voters are numerically or structurally shoved aside. This corresponds to the last step in the conceptual framework:

Affective Polarization → Electoral Behavior and Local Governance Dynamics.

Importantly, this means that political disengagement is not apathy but rather moral response to perceived betrayal. This leads the study to introduce the idea of "moral disillusionment": the condition for citizens withdrawing from public life not for indifference but for loss of faith in the ethical substance of political processes.

Beyond affirming existing frameworks, the study introduces several novel contributions:

- Local Moral Polarization: In the data, moral polarization does find its beginnings in the grassroots, shaped by the very real materialities, social recognition, and everyday political encounters.
- Dual Moral Economy of Politics: This research describes the existence of two moral economies in the first instance: the meritocratic ethics of the middle class and the relational-survival ethics of the rural poor. These moral economies are internally coherent but delegitimize each other.
- Emotional Contours of Moral Division: In a way, this study is an enrichment of the concept of affective polarization whereby emotions of resentment, shame, moral superiority, and betrayal become not merely reactions to but primary initiators of political behavior.
- Fragile Post-Election Cohesion: Respondents recounted the heightened political animosities of elections that vanish but for a short time immediately after. This provokes inquiry into the performative nature of political unity and its implications for survival governance.
- Moral Disengagement: A lot of the time political non-participation is viewed as sheer apathy or ignorance. This paper demonstrates that it can also be a morally charged act, as in the case of protest or survival.

Interestingly, looking at the results from this study, moral perceptions are social frameworks constructed around class experiences, structural inequalities, and political disenfranchisement rather than just a private ethical creed. These perceptions act as engines for moral antagonism, which in turn causes affective polarizations between the two: the middle-class and the rural poor. Such a condition in any form dismantles trust, breaks community engagement, and becomes a serious hindrance with participatory governance at the barangay level. The current study links the Affective Polarization Theory of Iyengar et al. with the Moral Politics of Wataru Kusaka in characterizing a more integrated understanding of morality as the site of conflict and a source for rejuvenation of democratic institutions.

Governance attempts in Barangay Población, therefore, now need to go beyond material inequalities and instill cross-class moral empathy, since both "efficiency" and "empathy," "technocratic competence" and "relational care" are understood to be "valid moral claims" originating from different life worlds.

Moral dialogue is needed to address polarization: a collective effort to engender shared moral understandings, to bridge antagonisms, and to reconstruct governance as one of representation but mutual moral recognition.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This research investigates how the moral perceptions of the middle class and the rural poor in Barangay Población, Malasiqui, shape local governance dynamics. Based on Affective Polarization Theory of Iyengar et al., and Wataru Kusaka's framework on Moral Politics, the study explored how moral frameworks are molded through class and influence political judgment, trust, and participation at the grassroots level. The investigation was guided by three core sub questions: (1) What are the differing moral perceptions of the middle class and the rural poor in Barangay Población regarding local governance? (2) How these moral perceptions manifest between the two classes? (3) How do these differences influence community participation and trust in local governance?

Findings demonstrated the slightly overlapping but distinct moral constructs between the two class groups. They shared common values like honesty, empathy, and religiosity concerning leaders. However, the middle-class discourses on efficiency and education which are indicators of professional credibility would then declare leaders as good leaders. In the case of rural poor respondents, high importance was given to approachability, fairness, and direct concern for the marginalized. These perspectives are reflective at the same time of material conditions and different moral expectations of lived experiences and social positions.

Furthermore, these conflicting moral appreciations have developed into types of moral conflict. Members of the middle class tend to view the political behavior of the poor in terms of their tolerance of selling and the reliance on patronage as moral failing and a threat to democracy. On the contrary, the rural poor see their political decisions as practical and moral answers to survival and historical neglect, whereas moralists middle class condemn such decisions as elitist, judgmental, and out of touch with feelings of the reality. This collision of moral world views has resulted in an engendered affective polarization, whereby emotions such as frustrations, bitterness, contempt, and anger characterize political engagement and interclass relationships.

Central to this development is the emerging scenario, which increasingly limits the political space for participation and indeed sets in motion an early process of political disaffection. In particular, trust in political participation is weakening. Trust in local governance rests on an incredibly fragile base of conditionality regarding whether the moral and practical expectations of their people are met by elected leaders. Middle classes leave this frame of participation because they feel disillusionment because of a lack of meritocracy. For example, leaving the political arena because political blocs mostly exclude and silence the rural poor also contributes to the fragmentation of civic participation and trust. Overall, the research confirmed

the initial proposal of this theoretical model and characterized the path from class-based perspectives to moral considerations leading to moral antagonism.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings at hand. First, moral perceptions in Barangay Población are highly determined by class. The middle class and the rural poor do not simply differ in economic status but also in their moral evaluations of leadership, citizenship, and political legitimacy. These moral evaluations are not neutral, as they are informed by how people experience class-based power, privilege, and exclusion.

Second, the study affirms Kusaka's thesis that politics in the Philippines is moralized according to class. Every class justifies the morality behind its political actions while casting both suspicion and disdain against the others. This leads to the development of moral antagonism through interclass blame, stereotype, and delegitimization. Political decisions such as acceptance or rejection of patronage are not only strategic; they are essentially moral battlegrounds concerning who is considered responsible, mature, and deserving of representation.

Third, these moral antagonisms have given rise to what Iyengar et al. conceived as an affective polarization. In this case, it will be different in Barangay Población. The polarization is not dependent primarily on ideological partisanship. Rather, it is powered by moral emotions of class. Each class experiences political disagreements not as having different opinions but as an affront to the common understanding of what is just and right. Such conditions have atmospherics of anger, resentment, and moral disappointment, which build more walls against trust, cooperation, and empathy between groups.

The growing disengagement from political processes shows how moral polarization is affecting local governance. Both classes are politicized by passive engagement; that is, abstaining from elections, not attending community gatherings, and distrusting elected officials. But this disengagement is not a mere case of apathy; it is the manifestation of moral disillusionment. This situation is indicative of a breakdown of faith in the political system being able to embody morally legitimate values that people can genuinely relate to.

To conclude, the study argues that unless these moral and affective divides are reconciled, local governance will remain fragmented, uninterested, and lacking in civic participation. No social cohesion can arise from political deliberations tainted by such nonrecognition from one class toward another.

Within this study's findings is one of morality's glaring centrality, often contested as it may be, in the grassroots political life. Moral judgments grounded in class in Barangay Población no longer become mere political judgments; they are tightly intertwined with the lived experiences, emotional worlds, and social locations of the people who deliver them. These moral frameworks structure not only how individuals perceive leadership and governance, but how they interpret each other's legitimacy as political actors.

At the heart of this division lies a difficult truth: two realities can be valid at the same time. This middle-class emphasis upon competence, integrity, and distant vision appears to embody a deep desire for institutional reform and sustainable development. Likewise, the rural poor's emphasis upon empathy, immediacy, and personal connection captures their own genuine struggle for recognition, survival, and dignity against a system that has long rendered them invisible. These are not fictive constructs or faulty logics; they are genuine moral responses

influenced by the very different worlds in which people live. As such, moral antagonism is not simply a political disagreement—it is a clash of realities that are both real, both valid, and both emotionally charged. What polarizes local politics is not that one is right and the other wrong; both sides hold and act on their own truths.

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