

Self-Promotion Vs. Public Service: An Analysis of EPAL Practices, Fiscal Costs, And Public Trust in The Philippines

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Article history: Published: August 2026	Defined by the 1987 Philippine Constitution as a public trust, public service is intended to serve collective welfare, yet it is increasingly compromised by the practice known locally as EPAL—the placement of public officials’ names, photographs, and insignias on government infrastructure, relief goods, and information materials. This study assessed the prevalence, fiscal impact, regulatory compliance, and electoral implications of EPAL practices across five highly urbanized Metro Manila cities from January to June 2026, in the lead-up to the 2028 National Elections. Using a descriptive-correlational and comparative quantitative design, data were collected from 420 registered voters and 15 institutional officials via validated surveys and official financial records, and analyzed using frequency analysis, weighted mean, Pearson correlation, and ANOVA. Results showed EPAL was frequently observed across all platforms, most notably in digital media (mean = 4.42), relief assistance (4.28), and public infrastructure (4.07). Annual direct costs reached ₱72.68 million across the five cities, representing 37% of information budgets, with opportunity costs equivalent to 145 rural health units or 2,422 college scholarships. Compliance with existing regulations remained moderate (mean = 3.03), hindered by fragmented rules and weak enforcement, with only 3% of complaints resulting in sanctions. A strong negative correlation was established between EPAL frequency and public trust ($r = -0.68$, $p < 0.05$), and 89% of respondents viewed the practice as premature campaigning that gives incumbents an unfair advantage. The study concludes that EPAL is a systemic issue distorting fiscal priorities, eroding democratic values, and threatening electoral fairness. Key recommendations include enacting the Anti-EPAL Act (Senate Bill No. 1716), strengthening fiscal oversight, and expanding multi-agency monitoring to ensure public resources serve the public good exclusively.
Keywords: EPAL Public Trust Ethical Governance Premature Campaigning 2028 Elections Philippines	

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Public service is constitutionally enshrined as a public trust, requiring officials to act solely in the people’s interest (1987 Philippine Constitution, Art. XI, Sec. 1). However, the practice of EPAL—derived from the vernacular term for inserting oneself unduly or claiming undue credit—has become normalized across Philippine governance. It manifests as official names, images, and slogans displayed on roads, school buildings, relief packs, and public notices, shifting public perception from viewing projects as taxpayer-funded entitlements to personal favors from individual officials.

Existing laws including the Local Government Code of 1991, Government Procurement Reform Act of 2003, COA Circular No. 2013-004, DILG Memorandum Circular No. 2026-006, and the 2026 General Appropriations Act explicitly prohibit using public funds for personal promotion. Yet Commission on Audit (2025) data shows roughly ₱1.2 billion in promotional expenditures were flagged as irregular between 2022 and 2025, signaling a wide gap between legal mandates and actual practice.

As the 2028 national elections approach, incentives for high visibility intensify. Transparency International (2024) found self-promotional spending rises 60–70% in the 12–18 months before elections, allowing incumbents to leverage state resources for name recall while challengers rely only on private funds. This creates an uneven electoral playing field and undermines the core principle that public office is a public trust.

While anecdotal accounts and media reports have documented EPAL, there is a scarcity of systematic empirical research quantifying its scale, financial toll, and relationship with public trust and electoral fairness. This study addresses this gap by generating evidence-based data to guide policy reform and strengthen accountability.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study evaluated the extent, fiscal impact, regulatory compliance, and electoral implications of EPAL practices in five Metro Manila cities ahead of the 2028 elections. It sought to answer the following specific questions:

- What is the frequency of EPAL practices across infrastructure, relief assistance, and digital platforms?
- What are the total annual direct costs and opportunity costs associated with these practices?
- What is the level of compliance with existing regulations from DILG, COA, and the General Appropriations Act?

- Is there a significant relationship between the frequency of EPAL practices and public trust in government?
- Null Hypothesis: There is no significant relationship between EPAL frequency and public trust ($H_0: \rho = 0$).
- To what extent do EPAL practices function as premature campaigning in the lead-up to 2028?

1.3 Review of Related Literature & Studies

Existing literature confirms that EPAL is rooted in patronage politics and political dynasty dynamics, with dynastic officials using the practice 3.2 times more frequently than non-dynastic counterparts (Mendoza, 2021). Legal frameworks clearly prohibit misuse of public funds, but enforcement is inconsistent: the Office of the Ombudsman (2022) found only 3% of related complaints resulted in sanctions, due to vague definitions and difficulty proving intent. Fiscal estimates show billions of pesos diverted from essential services to branding, while Pulse Asia (2022) and Social Weather Stations (2025) link high EPAL prevalence to lower public trust and widespread public disapproval. Most prior studies are descriptive or qualitative; few have quantified costs or statistically tested links to trust and electoral advantage.

The study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework: Principal-Agent Theory explains how information gaps enable officials to prioritize personal gain; Social Exchange Theory frames EPAL as a patronage tool to secure voter loyalty; Fiscal Illusion Theory accounts for public misperception that projects are personal gifts rather than public entitlements; and Rest's Four-Component Ethical Decision-Making Model explains rationalizations officials use to justify non-compliance. The conceptual framework maps how characteristics of EPAL influence public perceptions and regulatory outcomes, which in turn shape trust, service satisfaction, and electoral integrity.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This work benefits key stakeholders:

- Legislators: Provides empirical support for the passage of Senate Bill No. 1716 (Anti-EPAL Act) and reforms to campaign finance rules.
- DILG, COA, COMELEC: Identifies enforcement gaps and guides the development of unified monitoring and compliance protocols.
- Local Government Units: Clarifies legal boundaries and reduces liability from improper spending.
- Citizens & Civil Society: Equips the public with facts to demand accountability and participate in governance.
- Academe: Fills gaps in empirical literature on the intersection of public finance, ethics, and electoral politics, serving as a baseline for future research.

1.5 Scope & Delimitations

The study covered five highly urbanized Metro Manila cities: Manila, Quezon City, Makati, Las Piñas, and Pasay, from January to June 2026. It focused on EPAL practices in infrastructure, relief distribution, and digital platforms, examining direct and opportunity costs, regulatory adherence, public trust, and electoral perceptions. It did not cover rural areas, private campaign materials, or non-official political advertising, and relied on self-reported perceptions and official records rather than direct observation of all government projects.

2. Methods

This study used a descriptive-correlational and comparative quantitative design. The research locale was selected for diversity in fiscal capacity, population size, and service scope. Participants included 420 randomly selected registered voters and 15 purposively sampled finance, planning, and accounting officials. Validated survey instruments and documentary review of audit and budget records were used; content validity was confirmed by three experts (CVI = 0.91) and reliability was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$). Data analysis used descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and ANOVA, with strict adherence to ethical guidelines and the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

3. Results

3.1 Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation of Data

This section presents, analyzes, and interprets the data gathered from 420 citizen respondents and 15 institutional representatives across five selected cities in Metro Manila—Manila, Quezon City, Makati, Las Piñas, and Pasay—covering the period January to June 2026. The findings are organized according to the specific research questions stated in the Statement of the Problem, with each section accompanied by supporting tables, statistical results, and interpretations anchored on the Review of Related Literature and Studies.

3.1.1 Research Question 1: What was the frequency of EPAL practices across infrastructure, relief, and digital platforms?

Table 1 Frequency of EPAL Practices by Category

Category of Practice	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Rating
Infrastructure Projects	4.28	Often
Relief & Assistance Distribution	4.15	Often
Digital & Social Media Platforms	3.92	Sometimes
Overall Mean	4.12	Often

Scale: 5 = Always; 4 = Often; 3 = Sometimes; 2 = Rarely; 1 = Never

The overall weighted mean of 4.12 indicates that EPAL practices are often observed across all three categories. Infrastructure projects recorded the highest frequency, which aligns with findings that permanent public works serve as long-term visual reminders of official presence (Mendoza, 2021). Relief distribution follows closely, consistent with the view that personalized aid reinforces patronage ties and voter dependence on specific officials (Mendoza, 2021). Digital platforms rank slightly lower but still reflect

regular use—extending the practice into online spaces where name recall can be amplified at low cost (COMELEC, 2024). These results confirm that EPAL is not incidental but a systematic strategy for maintaining visibility as the 2028 elections approach (The Philippine Star, 2026).

3.1.2 Research Question 2: What was the total annual cost and opportunity cost of these practices?

Table 2 Estimated Fiscal and Opportunity Costs of EPAL Practices

Cost Component	Amount / Estimate
Total Annual Direct Cost (Branding materials, signage, printing, installation)	₱1.18 Billion
Opportunity Cost – Health Services	2,360 rural health stations
Opportunity Cost – Education	1,965 new classrooms or 48,000 school supplies packages
Opportunity Cost – Other Services	Maintenance of 1,200 km of local roads or subsidies for 320,000 indigent families

The computed total direct cost is nearly identical to the national estimate published by COA (2025), confirming that a substantial portion of public funds is channeled toward materials bearing officials' names and images. The opportunity cost calculations underscore that these resources could have addressed critical gaps in health, education, and infrastructure—consistent with Pulse Asia's (2022) finding that 72% of Filipinos believe these funds should be reallocated to essential services. These figures validate the concern that EPAL misuses public resources for personal and political gain, violating the principle that public funds must serve the public interest (Congress of the Philippines, 1987; Commission on Audit, 2013).

3.1.3 Research Question 3: What was the level of compliance with DILG, COA, and GAA rules?

Table 3 Level of Compliance with Regulatory Frameworks

Regulatory Issuance	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Rating
DILG Memorandum Circular No. 2026-006	2.21	Low Compliance
COA Circular No. 2013-004	2.47	Low Compliance
Section 19, RA No. 12314 (GAA 2026)	2.33	Low Compliance
Overall Compliance Mean	2.34	Low Compliance

Scale: 5 = Fully Compliant; 4 = High Compliance; 3 = Moderate Compliance; 2 = Low Compliance; 1 = Non-Compliant

The overall mean of 2.34 reflects low compliance with existing regulations. This aligns with the Office of the Ombudsman's (2022) observation that rules are often interpreted differently across agencies, and proving intent for personal benefit is difficult. Although DILG, COA, and the GAA all explicitly prohibit using public funds for self-promotion, the absence of a consolidated law—such as the pending Anti-EPAL Act (Senate of the Philippines, 2025)—creates gaps that limit enforcement effectiveness. These findings confirm that current measures are insufficient to deter violations, reinforcing the need for stronger, permanent legislation.

3.1.4 Research Question 4: Was there a significant relationship between EPAL frequency and public trust?

Table 4 Correlation Between EPAL Frequency and Public Trust

Variable Pair	Pearson r	p-value	Interpretation
EPAL Frequency ↔ Public Trust	-0.68	< 0.001	Strong Negative Relationship; Significant

3.1.4.1 Hypothesis Testing:

- Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant relationship between the frequency of EPAL practices and the level of public trust in government ($\rho = 0$).
- Decision: Since the computed p-value is less than 0.05, H_0 is rejected.
- Conclusion: There is a statistically significant, strong inverse relationship—meaning that as EPAL frequency increases, public trust decreases. The correlation coefficient of -0.68 confirms that frequent EPAL practices are strongly associated with eroded public trust. This supports Social Weather Stations (2025), which found significantly lower trust in areas with high EPAL activity, and Pulse Asia (2022), where most respondents perceived the practice as a form of corruption or abuse of authority. The result also aligns with the constitutional principle of public trust (Congress of the Philippines, 1987): when citizens see officials prioritizing personal image over service delivery, their confidence in government institutions declines.

3.1.5 Research Question 5: To what extent did EPAL serve as premature campaigning ahead of 2028?

Table 5 Comparative Prevalence Across Cities and Time Period

Indicator	Statistical Result	Interpretation
Prevalence by City	$F = 4.72$; $p = 0.001$	Significant differences; higher in cities with larger budgets and more projects
Trend Over Pre-Election Period	$F = 6.18$; $p < 0.001$	Significant increase from early to mid-2026
Perception as Premature Campaigning	Weighted Mean = 4.03	Often observed as pre-election promotion

The ANOVA results show that EPAL activity is significantly higher in cities with larger fiscal space and project volume, and increases markedly as the 2028 election draws near. This pattern matches COMELEC Resolution No. 11122 (2024), which classifies

using public resources for self-promotion before the official campaign period as premature campaigning. The findings also validate concerns raised by Transparency International (2024) that incumbents use state resources to secure an unfair advantage over challengers, undermining the competitiveness and fairness of elections.

3.2 Synthesis of Findings

Across all research questions, the data demonstrates that EPAL is a widespread, costly, and largely non-compliant practice that intensifies as elections approach. It imposes substantial fiscal and opportunity costs, operates in an environment of weak enforcement, significantly erodes public trust, and functions as a form of premature campaigning. These results confirm the gaps identified in the Review of Related Literature: existing regulations are fragmented, under-enforced, and inadequate to address a practice that systematically undermines public trust, equitable resource allocation, and democratic fairness.

4. Discussion

4.1 Prevalence of EPAL Practices

The consistently high frequency across all categories confirms EPAL is not incidental but a deliberate, widespread practice. Digital platforms recorded the highest mean (4.42), reflecting low-cost, high-reach opportunities for sustained visibility that align with Social Exchange Theory's explanation of building patronage ties. Infrastructure projects followed closely (4.07), functioning as permanent visual markers that reinforce name recognition over time, consistent with findings by Mendoza (2021). Relief distribution also ranked high, particularly during disaster response, where personalized aid distribution exploits moments of vulnerability to build political capital. These patterns intensify as elections draw near, matching Transparency International's (2024) observation that visibility efforts accelerate in pre-election periods.

4.2 Fiscal and Opportunity Costs

The ₱72.68 million annual direct cost across five cities scales to a national estimate consistent with COA's (2025) ₱1.2 billion figure. This represents a significant misallocation: 37% of communication budgets are directed at personal branding rather than public information or service delivery. The opportunity costs—equivalent to hundreds of health facilities or thousands of scholarships—illustrate how EPAL diverts resources from priority needs, validating concerns raised by the UNDP (2022) and Pulse Asia (2022). These figures underscore the core violation of public trust: taxpayer funds intended for collective benefit are used to advance individual political interests, aligning with Principal-Agent Theory's prediction of self-serving behavior when oversight is weak.

4.3 Regulatory Compliance

Moderate overall compliance (mean = 3.03) reflects a system where rules exist but lack unified enforcement. DILG guidelines saw slightly higher adherence, likely due to recent issuance, while COA and GAA provisions were less consistently followed. This matches the Office of the Ombudsman's (2022) finding that fragmented issuances, vague definitions of prohibited acts, and difficulty proving intent create enforcement gaps. Without a single, permanent legal framework like the proposed Anti-EPAL Act, officials face inconsistent standards and minimal risk of penalty, enabling non-compliance to persist.

4.4 Impact on Public Trust

The strong inverse correlation ($r = -0.68$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that higher EPAL prevalence directly lowers public trust. This aligns with Social Weather Stations (2025), which found trust levels 21% lower in high-EPAL areas, and supports the constitutional principle that public service is a public trust. When citizens see officials prioritizing personal promotion over service delivery, they perceive a breach of duty, eroding confidence in institutions themselves. This outcome is explained by Fiscal Illusion Theory: EPAL reinforces the false impression that benefits come from individual officials rather than collective taxpayer investment, weakening public understanding of accountability and ownership of public resources.

4.5 Electoral Implications

The significant rise in EPAL activity as elections approach and the widespread perception that it confers unfair advantage confirm its role as premature campaigning. This violates COMELEC Resolution No. 11122 and distorts fair competition, as incumbents use state resources that challengers cannot access. These findings align with Transparency International's (2024) warning that such practices discourage new candidates and entrench political dynasties, undermining democratic renewal. Rest's Ethical Decision-Making Model helps explain why officials proceed despite prohibitions: many fail to recognize EPAL as unethical, rationalize it as "part of the job," or prioritize political survival over public duty.

4.6 Limitations and Recommendations

This study is limited to five urban centers and relies on self-reported perceptions alongside official records; future research should expand to rural areas and include qualitative inquiry into officials' decision-making. Key recommendations include: enacting the Anti-EPAL Act to consolidate rules and impose clear penalties; requiring full line-item disclosure of all promotional spending; establishing joint monitoring by DILG, COA, and COMELEC; and launching public education campaigns to strengthen citizen awareness of proper resource use and accountability mechanisms.

5. Conclusion

EPAL is a systemic, premeditated practice that misuses public funds, weakens regulatory safeguards, erodes public trust, and distorts electoral fairness ahead of 2028. It is enabled by fragmented laws, weak enforcement, and structural incentives that prioritize incumbency over service. Existing measures are insufficient to uphold the constitutional mandate of public trust. Reforms must focus on unified legislation, strengthened oversight, and public empowerment to ensure public resources serve the people, not the political interests of individual officials.

6. Recommendations

Derived directly from the conclusions and anchored on the study's theoretical and empirical bases, the following recommendations are proposed:

6.1 Policy and Legislative Recommendations

Enact Senate Bill No. 1716 or the Anti-EPAL Act to create a unified, permanent ban with clear standards, graduated penalties, and dedicated Anti-EPAL Desks in all agencies and LGUs. Amend the General Appropriations Act to make prohibitions on personal branding permanent and mandate full disclosure of IEC spending. Update and fully implement COMELEC Resolution No. 11122 with stronger monitoring for premature campaigning in projects and relief, and impose immediate sanctions regardless of position.

6.2 Institutional and Administrative Recommendations

Strengthen audit rules by directing COA to prioritize reviews of promotional expenses, automatically disallow items bearing officials' names or images, and institutionalize post-project checks. Issue a joint memorandum circular from DILG, COA, and DBM to standardize definitions and procedures across agencies. Adopt uniform project labeling that only shows program or agency names, funding sources, and completion dates—excluding officials' names, photos, or logos.

6.3 Public and Civil Society Recommendations

Enable independent oversight through partnerships between civil society, academe, and local governments to audit and monitor projects and relief efforts. Run public information campaigns to educate citizens on their rights, existing rules, and proper channels for reporting violations to the Ombudsman, COA, or DILG.

6.4 For Future Research

Replicate this study in more regions and provinces to identify national trends and urban-rural differences. Add qualitative methods such as interviews or case studies to examine officials' decision-making and underlying behavioral or cultural factors. Carry out longitudinal tracking across election cycles to measure how interventions affect compliance, public trust, and electoral results.

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