

What thirty-three years of election returns say about the Iglesia Ni Cristo bloc vote

ANALYST REPORT · 1992 TO 2025 · PREPARED 06 JUNE 2026

The reputation and the question

Every Philippine election season produces the same ritual. Candidates make the pilgrimage to the Iglesia Ni Cristo's Central Office in Quezon City. Both sides of a contest court the same endorsement, often at the same time. Commentators speak of the "INC bloc vote" as if it were a settled force of nature, a switch the church flips to decide who governs. The reputation is durable, it is wielded as a political instrument, and it shapes the behavior of serious people who run for office.

Reputation, however, is not evidence. The interesting question is not whether the INC votes together. It plainly does, more than almost any other group in the country. The interesting question is whether that cohesion actually changes outcomes, and if so, where. A bloc can be perfectly disciplined and still be electorally irrelevant if it is too small for the races it is asked to decide. The honest version of the question is therefore conditional: under what circumstances does the INC vote materially move a result, and under what circumstances can a strategist safely ignore it?

The answer that emerges from the data is more precise, and more useful, than either the "kingmaker" narrative or its cynical opposite. The INC is a precision instrument. It is decisive at the margin and marginal at the top. The deference politicians show it is rational where races are close and overstated where they are not. What follows is the case for that reading.

What the bloc actually is

Begin with size, because size sets the ceiling on everything else. The 2020 census of the Philippine Statistics Authority counted 2,806,524 INC members, about 2.6 percent of the national population and the third-largest religious group in the country. That figure is frequently recited as "2.8 million votes," and that recitation is the first and most common error. A census counts people, including children who cannot vote. The deliverable electoral bloc is smaller.

The better estimate comes from Social Weather Stations exit-poll data, which put the INC at roughly 4.25 to 5 percent of the electorate. In the 2010 presidential race that worked out to

about 1.53 million presidential votes and 1.51 million votes for vice president. So the working number an analyst should carry is not 2.8 million but closer to 1.5 million deliverable votes, low single digits of a national electorate that now exceeds 50 million.

Cohesion is the second variable, and it is consistently misunderstood as total. It is not. Bloc discipline is high but bounded, and it decays down the ballot. In presidential races, exit polls and independent tallies put compliance in the high seventies to low eighties: 81 percent for Estrada in 1998, 74 percent for Arroyo in 2004, around 85 percent for Aquino in 2010, and roughly 77 percent for both Aquino and Duterte in the Social Weather Stations series. For senatorial candidates the number falls considerably, into a band of about 56 to 68 percent, which means a third or more of INC voters do not follow the senatorial endorsements. Cohesion is also, by the nature of the secret ballot, inferred rather than observed. Every percentage in this paragraph is an estimate with a range, not a measurement.

So the bloc is real, disciplined, and small. Hold those three facts together, because their interaction is the entire story.

The mechanism is genuine

The strongest evidence that the endorsement does something causal, rather than merely correlating with winners, comes from a 2025 study by Nico Ravanilla published in *Comparative Political Studies*, one of the discipline's top peer-reviewed journals. Using a triple-difference design on the 2007 and 2010 senatorial elections, matching municipal vote shares to census-derived INC concentration across 1,382 municipalities, the study found a near-unit-elastic relationship for endorsed candidates. A ten-point increase in a municipality's INC share is associated with roughly a 9.7-point increase in the endorsed candidate's vote share. The coefficient is statistically indistinguishable from one. For non-endorsed candidates, the same INC concentration produces essentially no movement at all, a coefficient indistinguishable from zero.

That contrast is the analytically important part. If INC-heavy places simply voted like the rest of the country, both endorsed and non-endorsed candidates would track INC concentration the same way. They do not. The endorsement, and only the endorsement, lights up the relationship. The study even addresses the obvious objection that the church might be endorsing candidates its members would have backed anyway, using the Reproductive Health Bill as a wedge: among endorsed incumbents who voted against the church's own position on that bill, the elasticity still holds. The mechanism is not an artifact of pre-alignment. When the INC says vote for this person, INC-concentrated places vote for that person.

This is the part of the evidence that justifies taking the bloc seriously. It is also routinely overstated into a claim the study does not support. An elasticity is a statement about how vote share moves with concentration within municipalities. It is not a statement that the bloc was

large enough to decide a national race. Strength of compliance and decisiveness of outcome are different questions, and conflating them is the second common error.

The reverse-causation problem

Now the harder evidence, the kind that should make any analyst cautious about the kingmaker story. The INC's reputation rests heavily on a simple observation: its presidential picks keep winning. Estrada in 1998, Arroyo in 2004, Aquino in 2010, Duterte in 2016, Marcos in 2022. Five for five. Surely that proves power.

It proves almost nothing, because the church endorses late and endorses leaders. The timing is the tell. In 2004 the INC delayed endorsing Arroyo until she had pulled ahead of Fernando Poe Jr. in the polls. In 2010 it initially leaned toward Villar and switched to Aquino five days before the election, once Aquino had clearly topped the surveys. The cleanest single demonstration is from the 2010 senatorial race: the INC released its endorsement list two days after the final Social Weather Stations pre-election survey, and the list mirrored the survey's standings. A bloc that announces its choices after the polls close on the question of who is winning, and then picks the winners, is following the race, not leading it.

Mahar Mangahas, the founder of Social Weather Stations and as authoritative a voice as exists on Philippine survey data, has called the church's deciding-factor reputation a "myth." He does not say the bloc never matters. He says the record is consistent with a group that endorses likely winners and reaps the credit. The peer-reviewed work of Allan Cairo Reyes points the same direction from a different angle: an endorsement delivers something on the order of 600,000 to one million votes, it helps trailing candidates near the cutoff more than frontrunners, and the probability that the church endorses a given candidate rises with that candidate's projected margin. Endorsement follows expected victory. This is reverse causation stated plainly, and it is the single most important corrective to the bloc-vote narrative.

The decisiveness test, tier by tier

Put the two halves together. The mechanism is real, so the bloc moves votes. The bloc is small, about 1.5 million, so it can only move outcomes where the margin of victory is within its reach. The correct test for every contest is therefore mechanical: is the estimated INC vote plausibly larger than the margin? Run that test down the ballot and the picture sorts itself cleanly.

At the top, in presidential races, the bloc is a rounding error. Duterte won in 2016 by roughly 6.6 million votes. Marcos won in 2022 by about 16 million. A 1.5 million bloc is neither necessary nor sufficient at that scale. The endorsement bought the church a seat at the winner's table; it did not put the winner there. The single national-executive exception in the modern record is the 2016 vice-presidential race, decided by about 263,000 votes, a margin comfortably inside the bloc's range, and the one national contest where even the skeptics

concede the INC may have mattered. The lesson is that the real variable is not tier but competitiveness. A national race decided by less than a million votes pulls the bloc back into relevance.

In the Senate, the bloc lives or dies at the twelfth seat. The top of the "Magic 12" is won by margins in the millions, where the INC is irrelevant. But the boundary between twelfth and thirteenth place is often razor-thin. In 2007 the gap between the twelfth-place winner and the thirteenth-place loser was about 18,500 votes. A discounted INC bloc of roughly one million deliverable votes dwarfs a gap like that. This is the clearest demonstrated capacity to swing a national result anywhere in the record. Note the careful phrasing: capacity, not proof of delivery. The bloc was large enough to have decided the marginal seat. Whether it did is a separate claim the public data cannot settle.

At the congressional-district level the theory is strongest and the data is weakest. Small electorates are exactly where a concentrated bloc should be most decisive, but there is no public database of INC endorsements and district margins to test it. The tier where the instrument should cut deepest is the tier we can say the least about with confidence.

At the local-executive level the capacity is real and the failures are documented. In 2007, 8.5 percent of mayoral races, 139 of 1,634, were decided by margins under 2 percent, and the average municipal INC share is about that same 2 percent. In those specific tight races the bloc could have been decisive. But "could" is doing real work in that sentence. The endorsement also fails at this tier when the margin is wide: in Caloocan, an INC-backed mayoral challenger lost to the incumbent by roughly 130,000 votes, 301,867 to 172,278, a margin no plausible local bloc could close.

The dog that did not bark

Here is the finding that should most discipline the strong version of the kingmaker claim, and it is a finding about absence. Across thirty-three years and every tier of office, the research did not surface a single verifiable case of an INC-endorsed longshot who demonstrably won because of the bloc, in a race where competing explanations can be ruled out. The strongest pro-influence proof the question demands does not appear in the record.

The best candidate is Bam Aquino in 2025. He sat sixteenth in the final Social Weather Stations survey and finished second nationally, a genuine surge. He is from the opposition, so unlike the simultaneous Marcoleta surge he cannot be written off as a Duterte-sympathy beneficiary. If the INC endorsement drove that climb, it would be the clean case. But the alternative explanations are at least as strong: a consolidating anti-Duterte vote, the recall value of the Aquino name, and a broader opposition wave that also lifted Kiko Pangilinan, who was not INC-endorsed. No precinct-level decomposition exists to separate the INC effect from those forces. The case is suggestive and unprovable, which is to say it is not a case.

The other near-misses fail on inspection. Richard Gordon was endorsed in 2013 and finished thirteenth, about 700,000 votes behind the twelfth seat; the bloc could not lift him in. Rufino Biazon was endorsed in 2010 and finished fourteenth. Rodante Marcoleta surged in 2025, but his surge ran in the wrong geographic direction, strongest in low-INC Davao del Sur and weak in his own INC-heavy home province of Tarlac, which points to Duterte sympathy rather than the church.

A reputation as a maker of winners should be able to point to at least one winner it made from behind. The INC's cannot, at least not from the public record. The absence is not proof that the bloc has never been decisive. It is a strong reason to treat the deciding-factor story as unproven rather than established.

Geography sets the boundaries

The bloc's reach is also geographically narrow in a way that matters for strategy. INC concentration is overwhelmingly a Luzon phenomenon. By share of a province's own population, Tarlac leads at 7.43 percent, followed by Aurora at 5.97 percent and Nueva Ecija at 5.85 percent. The three regions with the most INC members, Central Luzon, CALABARZON, and the National Capital Region, together hold more than 1.5 million members, roughly two-thirds of the national total. These are the places where the bloc most plausibly tips a close local contest.

The six cities worth reading individually tell a consistent story. Quezon City contains the densest INC concentration in Metro Manila, Barangay New Era, home of the church's Central Temple and administrative headquarters and roughly 95 percent INC. But New Era is one barangay among 142 in a city with well over a million voters. It can matter in a congressional district drawn around it; it cannot decide the city. Across the National Capital Region as a whole the INC is only about 3.16 percent of the population, below the threshold needed to swing most mayoral races, which are typically won by tens of thousands of votes. For Manila, Makati, Cebu City, Iloilo City, and Davao City there is no public precinct-level INC data at all, and the regional pattern argues that the three Visayas and Mindanao cities among them, where INC concentration sits well below the Luzon average, are the least likely places for the bloc to be locally decisive.

Why the pander is still rational

None of this means the politicians are foolish to court the endorsement. The behavior is rational even if the power is overstated, because the cost of asking is low and the cost of being wrong is asymmetric. A candidate who makes the pilgrimage to the Central Office spends a day and a little dignity. A candidate who skips it, and then loses a close race, owns a decision that looks negligent in hindsight. When the downside of courting is trivial and the downside of

abstaining is a potential post-election autopsy, courting dominates as a strategy regardless of the true size of the effect. The ritual persists not because the bloc is a kingmaker but because the insurance is cheap.

This is the resolution of the apparent paradox. The deference looks excessive relative to the demonstrable causal power, and it is, in lopsided races. But it is correctly priced in the close ones, and a strategist cannot always know in advance which kind of race they are running. So they buy the insurance every time. The behavior is rational at the level of the individual campaign even where the bloc is electorally marginal.

The verdict an analyst would give

Strip away the mythology and the cynicism and a clean decision frame remains.

Court the endorsement, and treat it as potentially decisive, in three situations: the marginal twelfth Senate seat in a competitive year, congressional districts in the INC-concentrated provinces of Central Luzon and CALABARZON, and tight local-executive races in those same areas where the INC share runs above five percent of the local electorate. In each, a disciplined bloc of roughly half a million to a million and a half votes can plausibly exceed the margin.

Discount the endorsement, and plan as if the bloc were not there, in lopsided presidential, vice-presidential, and top-of-the-Magic-12 races. There the margins run into the millions and the bloc is neither necessary nor sufficient. The "INC backs every winner" record is an artifact of a church that endorses frontrunners late, not evidence that it manufactures them.

And watch competitiveness rather than tier as the true switch. The 2016 vice-presidential race is the standing proof that a sufficiently close national contest pulls the bloc back into decisive range. The rule is not "national races are safe and local races are not." The rule is "wide margins are safe and thin margins are not," at every level of the ballot.

The Iglesia Ni Cristo is a real political force, more disciplined than any comparable group in the country, and a strategist who dismisses it entirely is making a mistake. But it is a precision instrument, not a hammer. It cuts where the material is thin. On the thick stuff, the lopsided national contests where its reputation is loudest, it barely leaves a mark.

This article is grounded in a two-pass research review of census data, Social Weather Stations and Pulse Asia survey work, peer-reviewed political science by Ravanilla (2025) and Reyes (2017), and investigative reporting from Rappler, the Philippine Daily Inquirer, and GMA Network. Where the public record runs out, principally at the congressional-district tier, in five of the six case cities, and for the 1992 to 2001 senatorial slates, the analysis says so rather than inventing precision. Bloc-cohesion figures are exit-poll estimates, not measurements, because the secret ballot makes compliance unobservable.