



## study

### Background

The Institute for Political and Electoral Reform (IPER) conducted a study on the voters' view of constitutional change from the year 1999 to 2000. The Institute decided to do such a study as a result of the numerous proposals and attempts to change the 1987 Constitution during the recent past. These attempts always have led to protests from different organizations reasoning that charter change was untimely and would only benefit the politicians proposing it. Following this reasoning however, it would be hard to know when then, would be the right time to change the Constitution. With the recurring issue of charter change and the persistent opposition of the people, IPER decided to conduct a study on the matter. The main focus of the study was to determine the real opinion of people regarding constitutional change.

The study was conducted in seventeen cities and municipalities across the nation. The methodologies used were focus group discussions and random survey with one thousand five hundred (1,500) respondents randomly selected from the voters' list.

The focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted in the same 17 areas. In each area, representatives from different groups such as people's, non-government, and sectoral organizations, and government offices joined in the discussions. The participants were divided into groups of anti-constitutional change and pro-constitutional change. The facilitators used a set of questions to control the flow of the discussion. The intention of the focus group discussions was to gather insights from the participants and to avoid debate.

## Findings

### Survey

The main objective of the survey was to determine the sentiment of the unorganized portion of the population focusing on three areas: the respondents' knowledge of the Constitution; their awareness of the charter change proposal; and their views on the proposal to change the constitution.

### Knowledge of the Constitution

A large majority of the survey respondents or eighty nine percent (89%) had heard of the constitution. The respondents' profession, income, and educational attainment were significant factors in judging their constitutional awareness. By educational attainment, vocational/ technical graduates had the highest proportion of constitutional awareness. Small businessmen/ vendors/ dealers and those belonging to lower-income brackets and high school graduates constituted the highest proportion of those who had not heard of the constitution.

When asked what a constitution is, majority of the survey respondents or sixty eight percent (68%) correctly identified the 1987 Constitution and answered that the Constitution is our "Saligang Batas". Only a few or twenty-two percent (22%) answered that the constitution pertains to directives from the President, twenty-six percent (26%) thought it to be local governance.

The survey respondents correctly identified the 1987 Constitution as our current Constitution. The most common answers about the content of the constitution were *sistema/ pagpapatakbo ng*



*pamahalaan, sistema ng paggawa at papapatupad ng batas and sistema ng hustisya.*

If we summarize the findings of the random survey, we can say that Filipinos in general have an idea of the Constitution.

### Awareness of Charter Change Proposal

Most of the respondents knew that there had been efforts to tinker with the constitution. The respondents more aware of the proposals or past moves to change the constitution were from Luzon, male, single, government employees and teachers, from the high income bracket (at least P60,000.00/year) and vocational/technical graduates. While those from Visayas, female, widow/widower, housekeeper/storekeeper/ wives, from lower income brackets (at most P59,000.00 a year) and high school graduates were less aware about such charter change attempts.

### Personal Position on Charter Change

Generally, most of the survey respondents were against constitutional change and mentioned several reasons why. The major reasons cited were as follows:

1. They lack knowledge of the contents of the constitution, thus, do not know which parts need amendment
2. Constitutional change was not a critical matter; the government should focus more on the important issue of the economy.
3. Constitutional change is not favorable to the poor and biased for foreign investors. They warned that profits of foreign investors would go back to their own countries while the foreign investors are using our own resources.

### Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

Each focus group was composed of 5 – 8 participants on the average. The FGDs' aim was to get the opinion of the organized sector regarding constitutional change. In order to avoid debate and conflict during the discussion, participants with the same position were grouped together.

Among the seventeen cities and municipalities nationwide, pro charter change participants were predominant only in the following areas: Aringay in La Union, Gapan in Nueva Ecija and Pila in Laguna. Participants in the remaining fourteen cities and municipalities were generally against charter change.

During the course of the discussions, however, it was discovered that those who oppose charter change were not entirely against it. The reasons given for their opposition to the change were as follows:

1. They had little understanding of the issue and would have liked to be updated on the issues and discussion on charter change. They wanted to check the content of the proposal first.
2. They thought that constitutional change was not an urgent matter as much as the economic conditions.
3. They believed that the 1987 Constitution was good enough; the problem was more the proper and full implementation.
4. They were against charter change feeling the changes would only favor the elite.

5. They also did not trust the intentions of the charter change proponents because they are politicians.

6. Charter change would require large expenses and would be a waste of public funds.

A smaller portion of the FGD participants wanted to change the constitution. The following were their reasons:

1. It would open opportunities for economic development, employment, technology advancement, and education that would lessen poverty.
2. The pro-charter change people thought that by changing the constitution, problems in the agricultural sector would be addressed.
3. They were amenable to some changes in the constitution, saying that there are flaws in the 1987 Constitution that need to be addressed while recognizing some good provisions that needed to be safeguarded and maintained.
4. They also believed that the 1987 Constitution was done out of revenge and in haste, and, thus, some provisions are not appropriate to the country's needs.



### Influence on the Perceptions of Survey Respondents and FGD Participants

The research study on the voters' view of charter change was intended to gauge the attitude of the public on the issue. Thus, it is important to know how they reached their position and what/ who influenced them.

For the survey respondents, the most common significant factors that influence them are their profession, income bracket, educational attainment and religion.

The FGD participants admitted that their main position on the issue has been strongly influenced by the media, and the one factor that unified their position was the influence of their organizations and peers.

Most influential for participants were the leaders of the organization. Majority of the members believed in the position of their leaders on the issue, but claim that they were not forced into that acceptance.

There were some organizations that tried to persuade participants to take their stand on issues like the local government units and the Catholic Churches.

Many participants viewed the Catholic Church as one political organization in society that took an anti-charter change position but said their own opinions were not affected by the stand of the church.

Muslim participants thought that the Catholic Church opposed charter change to protect and advance the interest of its rich donors. They called church leaders collaborators and hypocrites for not taking a position on the issue if it did not serve their interest.

Politicians have the least influence on participants over the issue. Their position is largely viewed as one of crass opportunism who only want to advance their political career and interest.

## Conclusions

The study on the voter's view of charter change supported the view that people generally are against changing the 1987 Constitution. The study points out that 69% of the survey respondents do not favor charter change whoever the promoter.

A great majority (89%) of the respondents knew about the constitution. Those who had more education and higher

income were more knowledgeable than those with less education and lower income. Among those who knew the constitution, two-thirds (2/3) or 67.84% saw the constitution as the country's basic law. Almost the same percentage (67.78%) knew that the 1987 Constitution is our current constitution with 30% to 53% able to point out specific contents of the constitution

The opposition ran the gamut of the population, without any great difference as to geographic location, sex, or religious affiliation. The only significant difference was in income level, where a significant majority of those having an income above P150,000 approve of charter change. This suggests that the rich view the present constitution as being generally biased against them.

The study also reveals that the majority of those who oppose charter change have three major reasons. One is their lack of confidence in the process stemming from their lack of knowledge about charter change. The second reason is their fear that the changes would benefit foreign investors against the interests of the poor.

The study also reveals the great influence of mass media in forming public opinion against charter change.

The focus group discussions generally validated the results of the random survey. It became evident that people were more open to discussion on charter change if they had more information on the specific changes being proposed. Their decisions would then be based on the merit of the proposed changes.

This thinking is significant in that the very idea of charter change is premised on knowing what is to be changed and on whether people would agree to such a change. This suggests a prolonged national discussion on the substance of charter change before deciding. It also suggests that people themselves wish to be direct participants in the process of constitution-making (or constitutional reforms), and not only their representatives. In this sense, the actual process of charter amendment or revision, whether through a constitutional convention, a constituent assembly, or people's initiative, is only the formal not the decisive part of the whole process. It further suggests that ratification, as a final step, will



not be a mere formality, particularly if the constitutional amendments or revisions provoke strong reactions from people.

It is interesting to note that proposals for specific changes in the constitution come from both the pro- and anti-charter change proponents thus validating the position that charter change depends on convincing the people that there are substantive changes to be done.

Data supports the view that the timing of charter change is important for both pro- and anti- groups. Significant opinions were posited for either of two options: 1) to make the change after the 2004 elections, and 2) to postpone until after 10 or more years. The last view is based on a feeling that the present constitution itself has not yet been fully implemented.

Certainly, there is room for charter change. However, the Ramos and the Estrada proposals came to nothing precisely because people were not convinced that their proposals were substantive enough or were in the interests of the majority.

## Recommendations

Given the results of the study, some tentative recommendations can be made, subject to a broader context analysis of these recommendations:

- 1) The constitutional change process, from start to finish, should ensure the direct participation of the people.
- 2) A considerable period of time should be spent on citizen education on both the change process and the specific constitutional reforms before the decision on charter change is made.
- 3) Another education campaign should stress the importance and role of the constitution in our political system.
- 4) The support of the people should be solicited for the process and substantive constitutional reform.