

Mediation Analysis for Civic Education and Ethical Discernment in Voting for Civic Leadership Correlation: The Role of Moral Values among Student-Voters

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Abstract

Poor discernment in voting for ethical leaders is disconcerting. The strength and significance of moral values as the mediator of the correlation between civic education and ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership was verified. Through predictive research design and mediation analysis of 360 data from randomly selected student voters, the study found that moral values partially but significantly mediate the determinant-criterion correlation, fully supporting the Moral Development Theory. Future research may address the 83.7% unexplained variance in mediation strength, while stakeholders sustain civic-moral education initiatives to foster ethical student voters and avert downturns.

Keywords: Mediation analysis; civic education; ethical discernment in voting; civic leadership; role of moral values; student-voters

1. Introduction

Student-voters carry a perpetual duty to select leaders, yet the decline of their ethical discernment has been globally recognized (Leininger et al., 2024). Global studies indicated that adolescents are more vulnerable to misinformation in ethical voting decisions, raising concerns that young people are increasingly drifting away from ethical considerations when choosing leaders (UNICEF Innocenti, 2023; Walter & Redlawsk, 2023).

Many societies around the world continue to struggle with cultivating citizens who exhibit strong ethical judgment in their political choices. In Benin, Malaysia, and Kenya, young voters are often swayed by social conformity and material incentives rather than a critical assessment of a candidate's competence (Wantchekon & Guardado, 2023; Zulkifli et al., 2025; Gathenya, 2023). Furthermore, in Brazil, younger voters are increasingly drawn to candidates who excel at image management and persuasive marketing rather than evaluating their ethical conduct (Silva, 2025).

In the Philippine context, choosing leaders has become less about values and more about vibes. Studies in Iloilo City, Laguna, and Central Visayas on electoral behaviour among young Filipino voters revealed that they are more attracted to how a candidate makes them feel, who they are connected to, or how visible they are on social media, instead of critically evaluating their ability to govern effectively (Amante et

al., 2024; Javines, 2024; Bacang, 2024). Filipinos' emphasis on personalism, familial loyalty, and relational ties sustains political dynasties and often overshadows institutional criteria in candidate evaluation (De Vera, 2024; Acuna et al., 2025; Daquila, 2025; Ibe, 2025).

Challenges in ethical discernment regarding student electoral behaviour may lead to consequences such as civic incompetence and a diminished sense of accountability, which is contrary to responsible citizenship (Cantiga et al., 2025; Damayon et al., 2025; Şener et al., 2023). Yet, despite these pressing concerns, student-voters' moral decision making, particularly in the Philippines, remains insufficiently examined within specific local settings, such as civic leadership elections in New Corella, Davao del Norte. This oversight underscores the urgency and relevance of the present study, given Social Studies' role in cultivating civic awareness, critical thinking, and social responsibility among students.

1.1. Significance of the Study

Guided by Sustainable Development Goal 16, this study highlights the role of civic education and moral values in shaping student-voters' ethical discernment in leadership selection. Aligned with the mission of Holy Cross of Davao College Inc., it underscores how education fosters principled political choices and responsible citizenship. The findings may offer insights for the Department of Education as it enriches academic discourse and supports efforts to cultivate citizens who elect leaders committed to public duty. Lastly, the local government of New Corella may benefit from this study, as it emphasizes the value of civic competence and moral reasoning in fostering meaningful democratic participation.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The objective of this study was to investigate the mediating role of moral values in the relationship between civic education and ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership. It specifically aimed to respond to the following objectives:

1. To determine the levels of civic education, as indicated by civic society and systems, civic principles, civic participation, and civic identities; moral values, as indicated by moral orientation and moral competence; and the ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership as indicated by candidate evaluation and commitment to political accountability;
2. To determine the significance of the correlation between civic education and moral values, and the ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership;
3. To determine the significance of the direct effect of civic education on ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership, controlling for moral values;
4. To determine the significance of the indirect effect of civic education on ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership through moral values; and
5. To determine the significance of the total effect of civic education on ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership.

1.3. Hypotheses

Ho1: Civic education does not significantly correlate with ethical discernment in voting for civil leadership.

Ho2: Moral values do not significantly correlate with ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership.

Ho3: Civic education does not have a significant direct effect on ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership, controlling for moral values.

Ho4: Civic education does not have a significant indirect effect on ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership through moral values.

Ho5: Civic education does not have a significant total effect on ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership.

1.4. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study was anchored in Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (1958), a stage-based model with six stages grouped into three levels: pre-conventional, influenced by external rules and authority figures; conventional, in which individuals internalize moral standards; and post-conventional, guided by principles beyond institutional authority.

The theory explains how individuals with well-developed pre conventional and conventional levels of moral reasoning progress toward the post conventional level. In the context of this study, civic education as independent variable indicated by civic society and systems, civic principles, civic participation, and civic identities (IEA, 2017) stands for pre-conventional level highlighted in the theory; the moral values as mediating variable indicated by moral orientation and moral competence (Lind, 2016) stands for conventional level as stated in the theory; and finally, ethical discernment as dependent variable indicated by candidate evaluation and commitment to political accountability (Love et al., 2020) stands for the post-conventional level asserted in the theory. Hence, this study is fully anchored on the Moral Development Theory.

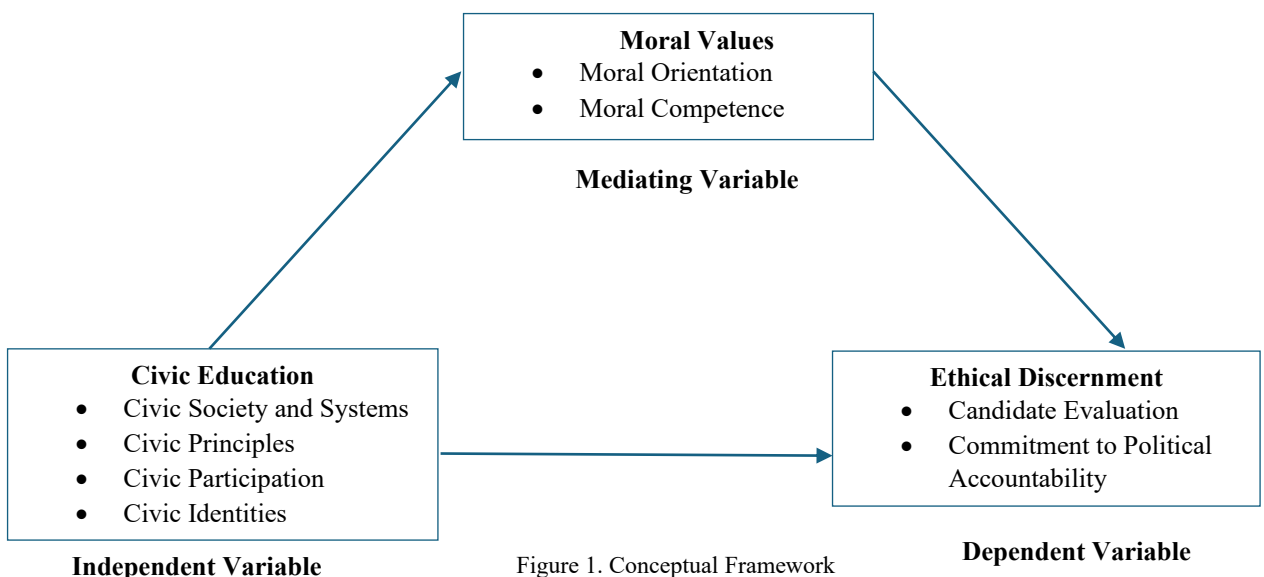


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

2. Method

This chapter outlines the research design, the locale of the study, the sample and sampling technique, the data-gathering technique, the data analysis, and the ethical considerations.

2.1. Research Design

In this study, a predictive research design was used. This design emphasizes forecasting outcomes by analysing patterns and relationships among variables, often using data-driven validation and large datasets to ensure accurate predictions (Hofman et al., 2023). It allows researchers to anticipate future behaviour, providing evidence for planning interventions, policies, and programs, thereby making them more feasible for large populations (Kamran et al., 2023; Erdmann et al., 2023; Kalisetty et al., 2023).

2.2. Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the municipality of New Corella, Davao del Norte. The locale consists of three major secondary schools under the supervision of the Department of Education, Division of Davao del Norte, namely, New Corella National High School, Limbaan National High School, and Mesaoy National High School, which serve as key educational institutions within the municipality. New Corella provides an ideal setting for this investigation, as it comprises a growing population of young, first-time voters who are actively exposed to civic education and moral formation within their respective schools.

2.3. Sample and Sampling Technique

According to the Municipal Commission on Elections records, the total population of student-voters aged 15 to 25 from both secondary and tertiary institutions is 5, 646. Using the Raosoft calculator, the appropriate sample size is 360 respondents. To ensure municipality-wide representation, a simple random sampling technique was used, in which all eligible student-voters in New Corella had an equal and independent chance of being selected. This sampling approach minimizes selection bias and improves representativeness, supporting straightforward implementation (Lakhre & Mishra, 2024).

2.4. Data Gathering Technique

In this study, a survey technique was used to gather data. It is a structured approach to gathering information from individuals or groups through standardized questionnaires to assess their views, behaviours, or traits (Goodfellow, 2023; Fitzgerald et al., 2025). It is widely employed in large-scale studies for its efficiency, reliability, adaptability, affordability, and ease of analysis (Kholifah & Sofwan, 2024).

Three standardized questionnaires were used in this research: the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) Student Questionnaire, the Moral Competence Test (MCT), and the Ethical Standards of Judgment Questionnaire (ESJQ). All questionnaires were adapted and validated to align with the respondents' background and the study's objectives. Each instrument uses a four-point Likert scale with specific indicators reflecting the respondents' current conditions. Additionally, the questionnaires underwent reliability testing, with all items achieving a Cronbach's alpha above 0.90, indicating that the three tools are highly reliable.

The first adapted instrument was derived from the published results of the ICCS conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (2017) in Malta, which measured students' knowledge, attitudes, and engagement related to civic and citizenship education. It includes 17 items and has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93. The second questionnaire, developed by Lind (2016), was designed to measure an individual's ability to make moral judgments. It consists of 17 items with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.916. The third questionnaire, proposed by Love et al. (2020), was designed to measure ethical decision-making through formalism and consequentialism. It comprises 18 items, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.915.

2.5. Data Analysis Technique

In this study, the data analysis techniques used were descriptive, correlation, and mediation analyses. Descriptive analysis focuses on summarizing and presenting data through numerical measures such as mean and standard deviation, as well as graphical displays, offering a clear and meaningful way to understand and communicate the key variables of the study (Blbas, 2024). Furthermore, correlation analysis measures the strength and direction of the relationship between variables, showing how changes in one variable are associated with changes in another (Patel, 2025). The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used as the statistical tool.

Lastly, mediation analysis examines how an independent variable influences an outcome through a mediator, separating effects into direct and indirect pathways to reveal underlying mechanisms (Schuler et al., 2024). The Beta estimate statistical tool was used to estimate the direct, indirect, and total effects of the determinant.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards in conducting research involving student-voters. Before data collection, assent and informed consent were obtained from all participants by clearly explaining the study, allowing respondents to ask questions, and asking them to sign and provide verbal agreement voluntarily before participation. The research instruments were validated and reliability tested to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings. Formal permission was also obtained from the Department of Education, Schools Division of Davao del Norte, to conduct the study in public schools under its jurisdiction. Additionally, the research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Society of Moral Integrity and Legal Ethics (SMILE) to ensure compliance with ethical, legal, and moral research principles. Furthermore, the ethical protocols set by the Municipal Commission on Elections of New Corella and relevant educational institutions were implemented to respect and safeguard the rights and welfare of all participants.

3. Results

This chapter presents the descriptive, correlation, regression, and mediation tabular presentations, along with the corresponding analyses and interpretations of the statistical results. It concludes with a summary of findings.

3.1. Descriptive Analysis Results

Shown in Table 1 are the descriptive statistical results of the study. Included in the table are the variables involved, namely, civic education, moral values, and ethical discernment, with their respective

indicators; and the number of samples, standard deviation, mean, and descriptive level specifically corresponding with each of the variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Table

Variables	Number of Samples (N)	Standard Deviation	Mean	Interpretation
Civic Education	360	0.41	3.12	High
<i>Civic Society and Systems</i>	360	0.43	3.19	<i>High</i>
<i>Civic Principles</i>	360	0.57	2.96	<i>High</i>
<i>Civic Participation</i>	360	0.60	3.05	<i>High</i>
<i>Civic Identities</i>	360	0.51	3.31	<i>Very High</i>
Moral Values	360	0.41	2.93	High
<i>Moral Orientation</i>	360	0.46	2.94	<i>High</i>
<i>Moral Competence</i>	360	0.43	2.91	<i>High</i>
Ethical Discernment	360	0.41	3.33	Very High
<i>Candidate Evaluation</i>	360	0.45	3.33	<i>Very High</i>
<i>Commitment to Political Accountability</i>	360	0.44	3.33	<i>Very High</i>

1.00-1.75 Very Low, 1.76-2.50 Low, 2.51-3.25 High, 3.26-4.00 Very High

Specifically, it shows that the civic education variable has a mean of 3.12, which is described as high. It suggests that the respondents have good civic education. Three of its indicators are also described as high, and the other one as very high. The corresponding standard deviation of 0.41 indicates moderate consistency in responses, suggesting that respondents were generally consistent.

Moreover, the statistical results reveal that the respondents demonstrate a high overall level of moral values, with a mean of 2.93, indicating strong moral values. Likewise, its indicators were also rated at a high level. The standard deviation of 0.41 denotes moderate consistency in responses, indicating acceptable consistency among respondents.

Finally, the results reveal that the ethical discernment variable had a mean of 3.33, describing a very high level. It implies that they have a very strong ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership. Similarly, each indicator was rated at a very high level. With a standard deviation of 0.41, responses still show moderate consistency, interpreted as acceptable.

3.2. Correlation Analysis Results

The correlational results are presented in Table 2. It also contains the r-value, the p-value, and the corresponding interpretation.

Table 2: Correlation Table

Variables	Ethical Discernment			
	r-value	p-value	Decision on H_0	Interpretation
Civic Education	0.555	0.000	Reject H_0	Positive, Moderate, and Significant Relationship
Moral Values	0.410	0.000	Reject H_0	Positive, Moderate, and Significant Relationship

Level of Significance: 0.05

Decision Rule: Reject H_0 if $p < 0.05$

Specifically, it shows that the correlation between civic education and ethical discernment variables yielded a p-value of 0.000. Such a value is less than the 0.05 level of significance; thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. It implies that the correlation is significant. The corresponding r-value of 0.555 suggests a positive correlation at a moderately high level, indicating that as the level of civic education changes, the respondent's ethical discernment tends to change accordingly. Correspondingly, the correlation between moral values and ethical discernment variables obtained a p-value of 0.000. Such a value is less than the 0.05 level of significance; hence, the null hypothesis was also rejected. It indicates that the correlation is significant. The corresponding r-value of 0.410 exhibits a positive correlation at a moderately low level.

These results implied that both civic education and moral values are important factors in shaping respondents' ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership, as enhanced civic education and moral grounding improve one's ability to make ethical decisions.

3.3. Mediation Analysis Results

Table 3 presents the statistical analysis showing the mediating effect of Moral Values on the correlation between Civic Education and Ethical Discernment. It also includes the path effect, beta estimate, standard error, z-value, p-value, and their corresponding interpretations.

Table 3: Mediation Table

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	β	z	p	Interpretation
Indirect	CE $\Rightarrow$ MV $\Rightarrow$ ED	0.091	0.024	0.091	3.77	0.000	Significant
Component	CE $\Rightarrow$ MV	0.457	0.047	0.459	9.81	0.000	Significant
	MV $\Rightarrow$ ED	0.200	0.049	0.197	4.08	0.000	Significant
Direct	CE $\Rightarrow$ ED	0.468	0.049	0.464	9.62	0.000	Significant
Total	CE $\Rightarrow$ ED	0.559	0.044	0.555	12.63	0.000	Significant

Mediated Proportion: 0.163

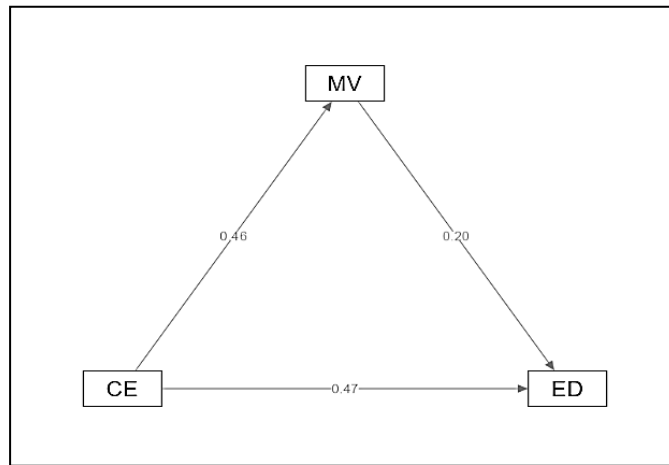
Level of Significance: 0.05 | Decision Rule: Reject H_0 if $p < 0.05$ 

Figure 1. Path Model Showing the Mediation of Moral Values (MV) towards Civic Education (CE) and Ethical Discernment (ED) in Voting for Civic Leadership

Specifically, it shows that the direct effect of civic education on ethical discernment, controlling for the moral values variable, was estimated at 0.468. The corresponding p-value of 0.000 is less than the 0.05 level of significance; hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. It indicates that the direct effect of the determinant variable on the criterion, controlling for the mediator, is significant. The result implies that civic education independently contributes to ethical discernment even when moral values are not considered. Moreover, the indirect effect of civic education on ethical discernment through moral values obtained a Beta estimate of 0.091. The corresponding p-value of 0.000 is below the 0.05 level of significance; hence, the null hypothesis was rejected, denoting that the indirect effect of the determinant on the criterion through the mediator is also significant. Lastly, the total effect of civic education on ethical discernment was estimated at 0.559. The corresponding p-value of 0.000 is lower than the 0.05 level of significance; hence, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that the determinant's total effect on the criterion is significant. The result signifies that civic education contributes to ethical discernment when both direct and mediated pathways are considered.

The table further shows that the mediated proportion is 0.163, indicating that moral values mediate the relationship between civic education and ethical discernment weakly. Nevertheless, since both the direct and indirect effects of the predictor on the criterion variable, either controlling for or through the mediating variable, are statistically significant, the mediating effect is partially significant.

3.4. Summary of the Findings

Based on the statistical results, it was specifically found that:

1. Civic education and moral values significantly correlate with ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership.

2. Civic education has a significant direct effect on ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership, controlling for moral values.
3. Civic education has an indirect, significant effect on ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership through moral values.
4. Civic education has a significant total effect on ethical discernment in voting for civic leadership.

4. Discussions

Discussed in this chapter are the findings of the study. The conclusion and recommendations are also presented.

4.1. Civic Education and Ethical Discernment Correlation

The finding that civic education has a significant, moderately high positive correlation with ethical discernment affirms prior studies showing that when civic education is strengthened, students' ability to make informed and principled political choices is enhanced (Wui, 2023; Timreck et al., 2025). Likewise, this current finding supports Dinglasan et al. (2025), who explained that civic education serves as the foundation for ethical discernment in choosing political leaders.

However, this current finding contradicts the study by Sánchez-García et al. (2024), which found that while civic education yielded certain benefits, direct involvement paradoxically intensified emotional pressure, serving as an indicator of diminished ethical discernment rather than fostering it.

4.2. Moral Values and Ethical Discernment Correlation

The finding that moral values have a significant, moderately low positive correlation with ethical discernment aligns with prior evidence that learners exposed to embedded values demonstrate higher competencies in discerning and engaging with complex ethical challenges (Saramosing et al., 2026). Furthermore, this current finding corroborates De Joya et al. (2024), who stated that moral values play a decisive role in voting decisions; however, their dominance may partially erode ethical discernment, as personal ties take precedence over merit-based considerations.

In contrast, the present finding is at odds with the study by Kulachai et al. (2023), which argues that moral values fail to drive electoral choice, as voting patterns emerge from multifaceted influences such as socioeconomic pressures, group loyalties, and mental shortcuts.

4.3. Mediating Effect of Moral Values

The mediation result in this study, which highlights the partial mediation of moral values on the correlation between civic education and ethical discernment, indicates that moral values strengthen the impact of civic education on ethical discernment both directly and indirectly. This current finding supports Abonales and Alvarico (2025), who reported that moral constructs mediate civic-related outcomes, thereby leading to more effective ethical discernment. Additionally, this finding affirms the assertion of Tian and Tang (2025) that integrating moral components into civic instruction enhances students' decision-making. Furthermore, the findings of this study substantiate the claim that moral values partially mediate, emphasizing that while moral

values continue to influence students' ethical discernment, civic education also reinforces their principled choices (Olaya, 2024).

On the contrary, the current finding challenges the assertion by Rubel-Lifschitz et al. (2026), who stated that moral values may not consistently function as reliable mediators in real-world decision-making contexts, particularly when stronger competing influences, such as social identity and external cues, are present.

4.4. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it was concluded that moral values partially and significantly mediate the relationship between civic education and ethical discernment in voting civic leadership. This conclusion fully supports the Moral Development Theory, which posits that individuals with well-developed pre-conventional and conventional levels of moral reasoning progress toward post-conventional moral reasoning, as civic education and moral values facilitate this progression, leading to greater ethical discernment.

4.5. Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the following are recommended:

1. Further research may explore other potential mediators to account for the remaining 83.7% unexplained strength of the mediation.
2. Exploratory studies may be pursued to reveal underlying factors or themes to be considered as variables, and to use the corresponding subthemes as indicators.
3. The school community may implement sustained, participatory civic education initiatives – such as student governance, deliberative forums, and public engagement activities that integrate moral values- to sustain these positive outcomes and prevent future declines.

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