



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH
(Scholarly Peer Review Publishing System)

THE EFFECTS OF VOTER APATHY ON THE GROWTH OF ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY IN ZAMBIA WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON KABWE CENTRAL CONSTITUENCY

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Abstract

This paper analyses the effect of voter apathy on the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia with a focus on Kabwe central constituency. This study was a response to the decline in terms of voter turnout between 1991-2015 general elections in Zambia. This study relied on a mixed approach which combined both qualitative and quantitative research and used key informants for in-depth interviews and questionnaires. The study reveals that there is a positive co-relationship between voting and the growth of electoral democracy since voting promotes citizen participation which is one of the cardinal elements for the growth of electoral democracy. The study further revealed that elections fosters political tolerance and ensures peaceful transfer of power. However a myriad of factors account for voter apathy, these include failure to change leadership, failure to honour campaign promises by candidates who emerge victorious, electoral violence, and religious beliefs, age eligibility, limited voting hours and lack or inadequate voter education. The study concludes that the problem of voter apathy is one of the major threats of any democratic process and it is exacerbated when the election process lacks credibility. The 2016 Zambian General elections were characterized with a lot of irregularities which saw the election results challenged in the Constitutional court by the main opposition political party the United Party for National Development (UPND). The study recommends for an automated biometric voter registration system and that it be a continuous process in order to allow those that would have attained the voting age and relocated to be registered in those areas. The study further recommends the change in the voting system to allow for compulsory voting to everyone with a national registration card as a mechanism to increase levels of voter turnout. The study also recommends reforms to the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) in order for it to be an independent, competent, autonomous, and impartial arbiter which can inspire confidence in the electoral process. Finally, voter education should be strengthened and conducted from time to time to empower voters with necessary knowledge and skills about elections.

Key Words: Voter apathy, Elections, Electoral democracy, Multipartyism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The conduct of elections is an important element of a democratic government. Legitimacy of the leadership depends on active participation of the electorate and representation of popular will. Through elections, citizens give their consent to the regime / ensuring representation of popular will and secures the legitimacy of the political system. Within the ruling group, doubts about legitimacy

undermine self-esteem (Dalton, 1988:35). The legitimacy of a democratic leadership depends, on the active participation of the electorates (Gans, 1978:54)

Zambia has a democratic system of governance. Democratic legitimacy requires approval of popular vote and control over decision making. Article 34 of the constitution provides for election of the President and Members of Parliament every five years through universal adult suffrage and secret ballot. Since its return to multi-party democracy in 1991, 6 multi-party elections have been held, under the First-Past-the-Post electoral system as provided for under Section 47 (1). However, voter apathy is on the rise in Zambia, as evidenced by declining turnout in presidential elections. The 2015 Presidential by-election in Zambia witnessed the lowest voter turnout of 32.36% in the country's democratic history.

Several reasons account for the low voter turnout which include inter alia inadequate electoral education, failure by politicians not delivering on electoral promises, partisan political interests / patronage political networks, cheque book politics, electoral violence, biased media coverage and long queues at polling stations during the polling day. It is paramount to highlight that voter apathy is a threat to the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia. It is against this background that the study examines the effects of voter apathy on the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia with a focus on Kabwe central constituency. The main questions addressed in this study are: What are the causes of voter apathy in Kabwe Central constituency? What are the effects of voter apathy on the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia particularly in Kabwe Central Constituency? What measures can be put in place to address voter apathy in order to promote electoral democracy in Zambia?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Electoral democracy became an engraved electoral phenomenon in many countries' democratic processes and has since been embraced by newly independent countries as a means for legitimate and genuine leadership recruitment in the post-independence period of many decolonized countries. During the post-independence period in Africa, Cowan (1992) describes this era as being marked with the emergence of a struggle mainly by African citizens against the one party political party systems which he refers to as a "second liberation". Cowan (1992) explains that this struggle was for the freedom from "homegrown undemocratic rules" by the newly elected African leaders who had promoted and embraced an oppressive and autocratic system. This was channeled through the abolition of multi-partism which provided checks and balances to the ruling elites in preference to a one party governance system which lacked these virtues.

The evolution of electoral democracy in Zambia dates from 1968 when the country conducted its first multiparty elections. The 1968 General Elections included the first vote for president, with Kaunda leader of the United National Independence Party (UNIP) defeating Zambian African National Congress (a renamed NRANC) leader Harry Nkumbula with 82% of the vote. The ten reserved seats in the National Assembly were abolished and the number of elected seats increased to 105, with an additional five members appointed by the President. UNIP won 81 of the elected seats (ECZ, 1991).

After conducting the first general elections in 1968, it is important to confirm that, in 1973 the country became a one-party state; general elections in the same year saw Kaunda run unopposed for the presidency, with voters voting yes or no to his candidacy (89% voted in favour). The National Assembly now had 125 elected seats, ten presidential appointees and a Speaker elected from outside the chamber. Although UNIP was the only legal party, up to three UNIP candidates could contest each seat. The same system was used for elections in 1978, 1983 and 1988, with Kaunda re-elected each time (FODEP, 2009).

Multi-party democracy was restored in 1991, with general elections held in October that year. Kenneth Kaunda was defeated by Frederick Chiluba of the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) in the presidential elections, with Chiluba receiving 76% of the vote. The MMD won 125 of the 150 elected seats in an expanded National Assembly, whilst the number of presidential appointees was reduced to eight. President Chiluba was re-elected in the 1996 elections polling 68.5%, with the MMD winning 131 seats and UNIP losing all 25 seats it had won in 1991 (African Elections Database, 2011).

2.1 Factors that Cause Voter Apathy: African Perspective

Population size and stability are crucial when it comes to voter turnout. In countries with smaller populations, the impact of each vote is greater and thus more people turn out to vote in an election. Additionally, people who reside in the same area for longer periods of time usually have better knowledge of local issues and candidates, and are also more concerned about the political decisions that affect their daily lives. Thus, they will be more likely to vote in an election. As acknowledged by Baek (2009) frequent movement from one place to another, on the other hand, may decrease people's desire to engage in the political process.

The other contributing factor to voter apathy in Africa has to do with economic development. There is a common understanding that people are more informed and engaged in political processes in developed countries, while economic adversity in Africa negatively affects political participation because economic hardship can result in voter apathy and lead people to withdraw from politics and focus on meeting their basic needs. This is in line with Birch (2010) who affirms that, in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs),

people affected by poverty do not have access to even a basic education that would enable them to understand how their vote is expected to affect the direction of government policies.

Voter turnout is also related to campaign expenditures. More money spent on campaigning increases awareness of an election, which can affect the feeling of 'civic duty' among citizens. Greater resources can also enable wider distribution of political information, which helps citizens to obtain the necessary information about candidates and political party platforms. On the other hand, there is increasing concern globally about the role of money in politics (International IDEA 2015). The involvement of large amounts of money in election campaigns, mainly from private donors, is creating intense debate about the impact of the richest segments of the population on national policies.

Political fragmentation has had an effect on voter turnout in Africa. As confirmed by Ogle (2004) the number of parties that contest an election can affect voter turnout, but there is no agreement on whether fragmentation increases or decreases turnout. Some argue that the availability of more parties gives more options to voters, and thus increases their desire to vote. However, the opposite may also be true—too many options can confuse voters and make it difficult for them to judge whether their vote will have the desired impact on the election outcome. Political fragmentation in Zambia is common however, its impact on voter turnout is still debatable.

The electoral system used during elections can to some extent affect voter turnout. As confirmed by Transparency International Zambia (2007) voter turnout is higher in elections that use systems of proportional representation than in those that use plurality/majority systems. Zambia uses a single member majority system for the presidential elections and plurality system for the parliamentary and local government elections according to the 2016 amended constitution. Whether this system has affected voter turnout, is what this research intends to establish. Compulsory voting is also deemed a catalyst to increasing voter turnout. Naturally, when voters are legally obliged to vote, turnout increases dramatically.

Voter apathy in African is attributed to registration requirements. This point is supported by Hamwiinga (2002) who confirms that the existence of individual registration requirements that must be fulfilled by the voter creates an additional burden for voters, because registration requires time and energy. In some settings, registration may also entail direct financial costs such as for travel to registration centers. These burdens can affect registration rates and consequently voter turnout. Automatic registration (i.e. the use of civil registries to create voter lists) or Election Day registration are seen as efficient ways of removing registration-related barriers. In addition, voting arrangements are associated with voter turnout. As acknowledged by FODEP (2009) the design of various types of voting arrangement can have an impact on voter turnout. These include single or multiple voting days, elections taking place on rest or working days, the availability of voting technologies, the proximity of polling stations and alternative voting procedures, such as advance voting, postal voting or proxy voting.

Age and education have also a significant impact on voter turnout. According to Branson (2003) age is one of the most important factors that affect voter turnout. Youth voter apathy is a primary source of concern in many countries. The findings of the World Value Survey research conducted between 2010 and 2014 showed significant low voter turnout between people aged 25 or under as compared to those aged 26 or over. The research covered 59 countries representing all the regions of the world. On the other hand, scholars do not agree on the impact of education on voter turnout; the higher levels of education can generally be associated with higher rates of voter turnout while other research findings argue to the contrary.

Political interest is another identified cause of voter apathy. As backed by Simfukwe et al (1997) the level of interest in politics can be a factor that drives turnout at elections. Societies that encourage citizens' interest in the political process through the introduction of citizenship education in schools, as well as a transparent environment that allows political discussion and debate, among other things, can boost voter participation. Meanwhile, voter turnout can be affected by civic duty. A perception of civic duty is one of the most crucial factors affecting attitudes to voting in elections. In many societies people perceive it to be their duty to contribute to political decision making.

Additionally, lack of confidence in the election management bodies in holding free, fair and credible elections is another contributing factor to voter apathy in Africa in general and Zambia in particular. It must be remembered that some voters could become apathetic to issues of election owing to their belief that their society lacks the capacity to hold a free, fair and violence-free election or due to their dissatisfaction with how past election disputes were poorly managed. In the Zambian case, at 32.36 percent, the 2015 presidential by-election voter turnout was the lowest in Zambia's history. Recent by-elections have seen a sharp drop in voter turnout with some areas recording as low as 20 percent of registered voters in particular constituencies. In accordance with the figures tabulated by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), turnout has been steadily declining over the years in Zambia. This clearly shows a display of the lack of confidence there is in the electoral process in the land.

In Zambia, there are so many factors that affect voter participation in a negative way and most of them hinge on lack of voter education. One of these factors is the lack of National Registration Cards. FODEP (2007), adds that in Zambia, the issuance of

National Registration Cards is problematic and always contributes to low turnout at various voter registration centers. FODEP (2007) cites Livingstone as a town in which many potential voters who intended to register as voters did not have National Registration Cards. This trend is the same even in many other parts of the country including Kabwe. It is possible therefore that many eligible voters are disenfranchised because they fail to obtain National Registration Cards. In Zambia, the exercise of issuing National Registration Cards has lapses such as no publicized roadmap, lack of information (civic education), poor media coverage publicity in both electronic and the print media. The other reason is that the process of voter registration is always too short to cater for all who qualify to vote. In most cases, a lot of people are left out and so do not participate in voting.

Another reason that affects voter participation is that most citizens have lost confidence in their elected leaders for failing to deliver on their promises and so most of the people do not see the need to vote. The other reason is that some do not participate in voting due to religious beliefs. For example, a christian sect called Jehovah's Witnesses do not participate in voting during the elections. In Zambia, the number of Jehovah's Witnesses is quite significant and if they were voting the voter participation can increase. The study therefore endeavoured to establish whether there is a relationship between development, campaign expenditure, political fragmentation, levels of education and voter turnout in Zambia and Kabwe constituency in particular.

2.2 Mechanisms that can be Employed to Encourage Voter Participation in Zambia

Civic education was needed to be carried out in order to encourage voter participation in Zambia. Hamwiinga (2002) defines civic education as a subject that relates to human beings and their relationship with the nation, physical, social, political and cultural environment. Civic Education facilitates the development of knowledge, capabilities, competences or skills and values or behaviors of individuals so that learners become personally fulfilled and constructive members of the society. The overall goal of civic education is to enable the learners to understand and practice their civic values, rights and obligations in their daily lives.

Involvement of pressure groups to promote voter education was also significant to encourage voter participation in Zambia. Simfukwe (1997) notes that pressure groups are some of the organizations in Zambia that provide voter education to the citizens. Pressure groups play an important role as communication links between the government and its citizens who wish to see that political leaders carry out the demands of the people. Pressure groups use a variety of methods to disseminate voter education and these include holding discussions with top political leaders and civil servants, carrying out press campaigns, holding demonstrations, holding seminars in communities on the rights and duties of citizens and writing petitions and advertisements. These activities that are performed by pressure groups have increased voter participation since 1991 when most of them were formed.

AVAP (2009) states that it has embarked on providing voter education aimed at targeting the young people; 'first time voters'. The programme was initiated in September 2009 at Kabulonga Girls High School and it attracted hundreds of pupils. The Anti-Voter Apathy (AVAP) is doing this because it realizes that the future of the country lies in the hands of the young people hence the need to engage the young people who are fresh with youthful minds. AVAP as the organization that believes that the young people have the ability and capacity to resist bribes and blind voting are the largest pool of the voting population whose number can greatly affect voter participation. This programme has so far been conducted in so many Schools in Lusaka like Kabulonga Girls and Boys, Munali Girls and Boys and Matero Boys and Girls. When this is ensured, voter apathy will be reduced since more youths will participate in the voting there by increasing the participation levels in voting.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study utilised both qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect, analyse and present data. For the purpose of collecting data in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants while questionnaires were administered to the target respondents. Members of the civil service, students and marketeers in Kabwe central constituency were involved in this study. A total of 50 respondents were interviewed. In addition, documentary search was utilized to collect data from the already published reports, books, journals and newspapers to collect secondary data. Quantitative data in this study were interpreted by the use of tables and figures. Content analysis was also used to interpret the data from books, reports, journals, interviews, discussions, newspaper headlines and articles, historical documents, speeches, and conversations. This research method allowed the qualitative data collected to be analysed systematically and reliably so that generalizations could be made from them in relation to the categories of interest to the researcher. The researcher also employed thematic analysis in analysing qualitative data in which categories of themes were considered and interpreted accordingly.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This section provides discussion and analysis of findings of the study. Ensuring are the key findings that emerged from the study on the effects of voter apathy on the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia with a focus on Kabwe central constituency.

4.1 Causes of voter apathy in Kabwe central constituency

In order to examine the effects of voter apathy on the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia, it is important to understand the factors that were responsible for voter apathy. Recorded and published data shows that voter apathy was caused by a number of factors as shown in the table overleaf.

Table 1: Responses on the Causes of Voter Apathy

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of change	6	20
Failure to honor campaign promises	9	30
Electoral violence	4	13
Religious beliefs	2	7
Age eligibility	3	10
Limited voting hours	2	7
Lack of voter education	4	13
Total	30	100

From Table 1 it can be noted that the majority of the respondents at 30% that failure by politicians to honour their campaign promises was one of the causes of voter apathy in the area. Further 20% of the respondents indicated that lack of change in terms of development compiled people in the area to stay away from elections. However 13% of the respondents indicated that some people fail to participate in voting because of violence and lack of voter education during elections. The study further established from 7% of the respondents who said that religious beliefs could have contributed to a handful of people staying away from voting during elections as well as voting time being limited. Finally, 10% of the respondent cited age eligibility as one of the contributing factors to voter apathy in the area.

Some respondents lamented that failure to change leadership was one of the reasons why some people decided not to vote during elections. One of the respondents had this to say. "I did not vote in the previous elections because elections bring the same set of rulers every time who had failed to deliver in the past. It's not worth it to vote for any of them".

The research findings also revealed that most of the people were fade-up with fake promises from politicians. They promise people a lot of good things but the moment they are voted into power, they forget about their promises and all they do is loot the public funds. This, to a larger extent, contributed to lower voter turnout in Kabwe central constituency. To authentic this point, one of the respondents indicated that, "Politics is a dirty business and politicians roll in the dirt. There is nothing they can do to change my mind. As long as I see that there is corruption I will not vote. Not one single candidate appeals to me. It is the same over and over again."

The findings of the research also revealed that lack of voter education contributed to low voter turnout in Kabwe central constituency. According to Verba et al. (1995), education was the most important predictor of voting behaviour in the United States. In Zambia, education is believed to give people an appreciation for opinions different from their own.

It was also discovered that some people could not participate in voting due to religious reasons. Some respondents indicated that some people did not participate in voting because of their religious beliefs and as such the number of voters is low. One of the respondents said, "I have not participated in voting before because I am a Jehovah's Witness and my faith does not permit me to vote".

The cause of low voter turn-out in Kabwe central constituency according to research findings was age eligibility. Some youths could not participate in voting because they did not reach the age of 18 which could make them eligible to vote in Zambia. As acknowledged by Monga (1999:12) "Countries with compulsory voting tend to have higher levels of turnout than those with age limitation".

Another cause of low voter turnout in Kabwe central constituency as gleaned from the research findings is limited hours of voting. It was noted that some people could not vote owing to the limited time that is set for voting. They argued that they were sometimes engaged from morning to evening which made them miss out on voting.

By and large, the findings of the study indicated that some people stayed away from voting due to lack of voter education. Some respondents said that voter education could go a long way in persuading many people to realize the importance of voting and this is why it was significant. In the views of Rochester and Pearson (1984) when it comes to voter education, electoral authorities can target young citizens through specially designed information and education campaigns including the use of advertisements, pamphlets, radio and television programmes, visits to schools and universities, and information displays at youth events to encourage more people to vote.

4.2 Effects of voter apathy on the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia

The findings of the study indicated that voter apathy might lead to a decrease in the democratic ideals of the country. The participants of the study revealed that voter apathy made election results not to reflect the will of the people. This is in consonance with the words of Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) who argued that, the lower the turnout, the greater the chance that the election result is not the outcome preferred by the population of potential voters. It was made clear by one of the participants in the study who clearly stated that, *“voter apathy makes it possible for minorities to defeat majorities”*. According to the findings, one of the most important effects of voter apathy on the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia is that decisions are made by a minority of the population.

In addition, the findings indicated that, while voting was not the only important thing for an electoral democracy to thrive, it is necessary for it to grow. The findings revealed that voter apathy was so devastating to the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia because people are not accurately represented. As a result, the country continues to function based on a small group of people's opinions. This meant that people who always vote make the decisions, even if those decisions did not benefit the country as whole. According to the findings, in the recent past many citizens fail to participate in voting and those who turn out to vote are systematically unrepresentative of the eligible population. This state of affairs is a threat to the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia. It was observed that voter apathy posed a significant challenge for a democratic government which was designed with the goal of translating public preferences into public policies. It is very difficult for the citizens' preferences to be represented if they fail to participate in a democratic process such as voting.

Further, the findings from this study revealed that political participation was one of the most important democratic ideals. One of the participants strongly felt that democracy cannot properly function without the involvement of majority citizens. Therefore, low voter turnout might be a threat to electoral democracy in Zambia. Voter apathy therefore compromises the legitimacy of the government and the legitimacy of any government can be made strong through a widespread participation of the majority citizens through an election. One participant in this study said, *“Low voter turnout can be seen as an indicator of low legitimacy and limited political stability”*.

5. CONCLUSION

As this study has shown, voter apathy indeed affects the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia. It is important to note that the problem of low voter turnout is associated with a number of chief among them included, lack of change, failure to honour campaign promises, electoral violence, and Religious beliefs, age eligibility, limited voting hours and lack of voter education. These factors made a lot of people to stay away from voting and as such the growth of electoral democracy in Zambia is being affected negatively because electoral democracy entails a democratic government based on a system that enables all the citizens to select one candidate from a list of competitors for political office. The process is called an election. There however other factors other than an electoral process with high voter turnout which are critical for the growth and development of democracy; an independent, impartial judiciary, observance of rule of law, the operation of the arms of government as independent and separate entities providing checks and balances to each other, adherence to good governance tenets of transparency and accountability as well as protection and promotion of human rights in their broad spheres.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the research, the researcher made the following recommendations;

- The registration system used by the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) ought to be made automatic and compulsory to facilitate high voter turnout. Voter registration should be a continuous process to allow those that have attained the voting age and relocated to be registered in those areas.
- The voting system also needs to be changed to allow for compulsory voting to everyone with a national registration card.
- The ECZ should come up with special voting provisions. For example, absentee ballots which may be cast prior to Election Day, or provisions that allow citizens to vote outside their home district, facilitate voting.
- There is a need to reform the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) in order for it to function as a truly independent, competent, transparent, autonomous, and impartial arbiter of the electoral process that inspires confidence in the electorate.

- Voter education should be strengthened and conducted from time to time to empower voters with necessary knowledge and skills about elections. Civil society organisations should compliment government efforts through voter mainstreaming and the government should open up the space for civil society organisations to flourish.

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