



VOTING IN DEMOCRACY: AN INSTRUMENT OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

Democracy has been described as the system government through which people of a given society manage their political, economic, environmental and social affairs whether directly or indirectly. It is a form of government where people have opportunity of directly getting involved in making decisions that affects their lives or indirectly through elected representatives. Central to democracy is election where people are usually elected to occupy positions of authority in order to represent and protect the interest of those who elected them. This election normally takes place through voting which is a formal way of choosing and expressing ones' interest in a particular candidate who stands in for election. It follows that democracy is about elections and elections is about voting, as such voting is a pillar upon which both democracy and elections rest. At the same time the level or extent of societal development depends on the nature, type or characteristics of its elected leaders. This paper therefore discusses the importance of voting in an election in the development of a society. It highlights issues such as voting systems, concepts of development, voting in democracy and development as well as implications of not voting in an election.

Keywords: democracy, development, human, instrument and voting

1. Introduction

"Our votes must go together with our guns. After all, any vote we shall have been the product of the gun. The gun which produces the vote should remain its security officer - its guarantor. The people's votes and the people's guns are always inseparable twins".

(Mugabe, u.d.)

"Voting is the most precious right of every citizen, and we have a moral obligation to ensure the integrity of our voting process".

(Clinton, u.d.)

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Vote is a formal indication of a choice between two or more candidates or courses of action, expressed typically through a ballot or a show of hands; it is the right to register a choice in an election (Oxford Dictionaries, u.d.). Voting is the expression of one's preference or choice for a candidate or for a proposed resolution of an issue or expressing an opinion, by casting a vote (The Free Dictionary, u.d.). It is usually formal expression of opinion or will in response to a proposed decision, especially, one given as an indication of approval or disapproval of a proposal, motion, or candidate for office, the total number of such expressions of opinion made known at a single time (e.g. at an election) (Thesaurus: An Encyclopedia Britannica, u.d.).

Voting dates back to elections held in ancient Greece, ancient Rome and throughout the Medieval period. It is a right that, throughout history, our founding fathers have fought for and sacrificed everything to achieve. "One man one vote" is the fairest method to choose leaders in any democratic society. Voting is a patriotic right to choose your representative government. A citizen's vote is often a secret ballot. Voting is the most important exercise a citizen will do as a responsible citizen of a democratic nation. In a functioning democracy, being able to vote allows citizens to express their political opinions by voting a particular policy or candidate that has your best interest in mind. By this, you can decide your very own future by opting a candidate who might speculate your own aspects and possibly those people who share the same opinion with you (Adewale, 2011). In a democracy, a government is chosen by voting in an election; a way for an electorate to elect, i.e. choose, among several candidates for rule. In a representative democracy voting is the method by which the electorate appoints its representatives in its government. A vote is a formal expression of an individual's choice in voting, for or against some motion (for example, a proposed resolution), for a certain candidate, a selection of candidates, or a political party. A secret ballot or voting has come to be the practice (e.g. in Nigeria) to prevent voters from being intimidated and to protect their political privacy. Voting usually takes place at a polling station; it is voluntary in some countries, compulsory in others, such as Australia (Abahlali, 2009).

Suffice it to say that voting is the best way to get one's opinions heard, as it allows one to select the candidate, in case of election, who best represents their view or views. In this way, the voters' future is decided by the decisions they make when voting. Voting also helps democracy to prevail and if people did not vote they would be ruled by someone who would not necessarily represent them or have the country's interests at heart. Voting is a very important civil right because it is a legal and human right, privilege and responsibility. Voting in an election gives the public or the community power to determine their future leaders (ask.com, u. d.).

2. Voting System and Types

A voting system is a method by which voters make a choice between options, often in an election or on a policy referendum (a direct vote in which an entire electorate is asked to either accept or reject a particular proposal). A voting system enforces rules to ensure valid voting, and how votes are counted and aggregated to yield a final result.

There are many systems of voting across the globe depending on the political culture of societies. However, common voting systems are:

- 1) **Majority rule** is a decision rule that selects alternatives which have a majority, that is, more than half the votes. It is the binary decision rule used most often in influential decision-making bodies, including the legislatures of democratic nations.
- 2) **Proportional representation (PR)** is a concept in voting systems used to elect an assembly or council. PR means that the number of seats won by a party or group of candidates is proportionate to the number of votes received. For example, under a PR voting system, if 30% of voters support a particular party then roughly 30% of seats will be won by that party.
- 3) The **plurality voting system** is a single-winner voting system often used to elect executive officers or to elect members of a legislative assembly which is based on single-member constituencies) with a number of variations and methods such as first-past-the-post (A first-past-the-post (abbreviated FPTP or FPP) election is one that is won by the candidate with more seats than any other(s).
- 4) **Preferential voting** denotes all election methods that involve ranking candidates in order of preference or assigning number to them, depending on which country it is used (Wikimedia Foundation, 2014).

3. Concept of Development

Development is a socio-economic process that was adopted after 1945 by developing countries in order to overcome their economic and institutional backwardness. A key component of development is the improvement of the material condition of the populace and equitable distribution of resources and elimination of poverty. Consequently, development is a multi-faceted phenomenon encompassing economic, social and political dimensions (as such provision of infrastructures is not the only solution to the problems of development, though it is important) (Muhammad, 2002). Development is broadly defined as a multi-dimensional process of change in the social structure, attitude, institutions as well as the general acceleration of economic growth through reduction of inequality and poverty (Todaro, 1977).

The process of development is tied to the state of society as a whole in which the individual could make effective contribution by increasing the skills of people through education and mass mobilization. Development is thus, the process of harnessing the human resources in order to conquer the environment for the betterment of the people in accordance with its values, customs and traditions (Muhammad, 2002).

The key foundation of the development process in an Islamic perspective as observed by Abu-Rasheed and Belarbi (1993:48 cited in Ahmad, 2002) is the behaviour of the altruistic rational man seeking the satisfaction and pleasures of this world as well as felicity in the hereafter. The highest form of altruism and self-sacrifice is self-exertion for the sake of Almighty Allah (SWT) or the establishment of an Islamic social order. Holy Qur'an calls this *Jihad* with one's wealth and life, which denotes any moral or

physical effort as well as financial expenditure for socially collective welfare (Haq, 1995 cited in Ahmad, 2002). Development from an Islamic perspective can therefore be defined as a just and balanced improvement in the condition of man and his environment in accordance with the Islamic world view (Ahmad, 2002).

Rodney (1972) describes development at individual level to include increased in skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. Although, some of these are difficult to evaluate as they depend on the age, social class and one's perception of what is right and wrong, but they are virtually moral categories, and achievement of any of those aspects of personal development is very much tied in with the state of the society as a whole.

4. Voting for Development

Development therefore deals with one important aspect of individual life that concerns with achieving and exercising positions of governance or organizing control over a human community, particularly a state, and other political process such as elections and voting. However, the way we act, react or behave towards issues within our immediate environment determine our level of knowledge about the environment which is measured by our ability to manipulate or utilize our environmental resources for the development of our societies. In other words, our ability to participate in the governance of our societies at various levels depends on our knowledge of the political processes.

In a perfect democracy, voting is the opportunity to elect or re-elect government officials and allows citizens to have a voice at any level of government and the areas that affect their life. Voting helps to eliminate the threat of a tyrannical government because, a vote cast today has a way of having impact to the present and future generations, through electing patriotic and progressive leaders in to corridors of power who will judiciously utilize the societal resources to plan and execute development projects that impact directly or indirectly on the lives of people and generations to come. The responsibility to be a good citizen and citizenship requires voting during an election. Voting gives the population an equal opportunity completely irrespective of sex, race, origin, education in contributing to community development as individuals are contributing in determining the best or right people to run the societal affairs, including those developmental issues like the provision of qualitative and accessible education, health care and other social welfare services as well as the provision of infrastructures. Voting helps to shape public developmental policy (e.g. policies on taxation, social welfare services and what have you) on a local and national level especially when you are well informed about the governmental activities. Voting for a candidate with little or no chance of winning or for the lesser of two evils is both a privilege and obligation in a democratic republic (Adewale, 2011).

Voting is gathering of human experiences in determining the future of a particular nation. Voting in an election shows your commitment and care about your community development, by this, you become engage with diverse people of the

society and the activities of the nation in general. Voting is the best way to influence the nation in which we live. Your vote holds your state and national leaders responsible for the decisions they make. Voting gives true meaning to the immortal words of Abraham Lincoln that *“You can fool some of the people all of the time and all the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time”*. Eligible and responsible voters always take their time, to read the parties programmes and agendas, study the candidate’s ideas, integrity, capabilities, personal records, their future plans and how they stand on public issues.

Nigeria, as a country, now practice democracy, a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections with active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life. The key role of citizens in a democracy is to participate in public life. Citizens have an obligation to become informed about public issues, to watch carefully how their political leaders and representatives use their powers, and to express their own opinions and interests on issues related to private and societal development. Voting in elections is another important civic duty of all citizens. But to vote wisely, each citizen should listen to the views of the different parties and candidates, and then make his or her own decision on whom to support. Participation can also involve campaigning for a political party or candidate, standing as a candidate for political office, debating public issues, attending community meetings, petitioning the government, and even protesting (Adewale, 2011).

5. Importance of Voting in Democracy

Voting is not just important to democracy, voting is democracy. You cannot have a successfully run democratic system without the support and votes of the citizens. The definition of a democracy even has voting in it. A democracy is a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections. Voting rights at one point were only given to some specific individuals in society, with various amendments now women can vote at the voting age of 18. These amendments were done to get more people voting and would never have happened if voting was not important. Without the votes of the people our democracy would expire, it would turn into a country run by the people with special interest groups. In fact, our government would become a dictatorship rather than a democracy. Nobody wants to live in a place run where your thoughts and opinions do not matter (Brewster, 2005).

Voting gives the ability for people to express their opinions about the government and the power to do it lies in peoples’ hands when they vote. People are given a really great opportunity that many people do not take advantage of, the opportunity to change what they do not like and bring about something they do like. Meanwhile, every vote reassures our democracy and makes it stronger, as such we cannot allow for it to weaken and disintegrate. Still today only half of all voters take part in voting day, partly because many people are angry with the government and do

not care to vote. Others despise the candidates or do not believe their vote counts, and do not have interest in the issues that are up for vote. No matter what their reasons are they need to vote. You cannot bicker about the government or suggest and contribute to any development process in the society when you do not go out and vote, at least to try and change what you are angry about. It is your right as a citizen and it should be taken advantage of (Brewster, 2005).

You cannot win if you do not play. Election outcomes are determined by those who participate. Elected officials make important (often life and death) decisions about how our society will expand its collective resources for development and the restraints it will place on individual behavior. The drinking age, the age at which you can get a driver's license and the amount of money your teachers receive, other developmental programmes are some of the decisions made by elected officials. In making those decisions, elected officials respond to people who bother to vote more than to those who abstain. Voting does not guarantee that one's preferences will prevail, but choosing not to vote denies a person one of the key tools of having a say in a democracy (The Dirksen Centre, 2012).

5.1 Notable Facts on the Power of Just One Vote from Got Politics? (u.d.)

- 1645, One vote gave Oliver Cromwell control of England.
- 1776, One vote gave America the English language instead of German.
- 1868, One vote saved President Andrew Jackson from impeachment.
- 1875, One vote changed France from a monarchy to a republic.
- 1876 One vote gave Rutherford B. Hayes the Presidency of the United States of America.
- 1923, One vote gave Adolf Hitler leadership of the Nazi Party.
- 1941, One vote saved the Selective Service - just weeks before Pearl Harbor was attacked.
- 1990, One vote decided a state House race in Oakland County, Michigan.

5.2 Implications of not Voting

In most cases it is a plain ignorance that makes a citizen decides just not to vote without any reasonable reason, as apathy to voting may be due to lack of willingness or illiteracy. Meanwhile, inaction does not breed change or bring development, but only worsen the situation. The citizens' apathy or laziness to show up and make their votes count is frequently lead to country in a very vulnerable and perilous position due to incompetent and irresponsible leaders (Adewale, 2011).

If you do not vote during an election, you are surely voting indirectly against democracy and making way for irresponsible leaders who might negate the development of people and societies. By not voting, you give away your right to influence the government overall. According to some scholars, if you decide not to vote, you are taking away the "*...will of the majority that governs..., but replaces it with the will of the minority*". It is essential that registering and voting are really ways that we can control the way we live in a democratic dispensation and determine our development.

The sheer volume of non-voters simply destroys democratic process making it gradually slip away. Your only vote can make a difference because many local elections can be decided by just a single, solitary vote or handful of votes. If you do not vote, it encourages bad officials. Voting is the foremost way to exhibit good citizenship and civil responsibility. People should get involved in elections and educated in all political measures. By this they become good and responsible participatory citizens. We should always remember that some people sacrifice their lives to preserve our freedom and let us have this voting opportunity as our sacred right. True democracy demands the involvement of the people otherwise in absence of that there is no democracy (Adewale, 2011).

6. Conclusion

It is always advisable to vote for credible people or candidates and not political parties as this determine the faith of the nation. It is the law of the nature that those who vote for a candidate for money, out of anger, ignorance, race, sex or ignorance will surely get what they voted for. The result is inept and corrupt leaders and politicians who may not have initiatives for development. The positive impact of eligible voters in electoral process makes voting important. A country's democracy, development and people's choice depend on voting. So, we should take the initiative to vote for someone that reflects our overall views. Your vote affirms your rights as free citizens to elect your representative and take part in democracy, governance and development of your society. The truth is that your vote count and it can make a difference every time you cast your vote. Without voting, definitely, there will be no democracy to talk about. Voting helps us to have new set of people representing us with fresh new developmental ideas to help heal the damage that their predecessors have done (Adewale, 2011).

6.1 Suggestions

Democracy is not possible without the peoples' vote. It has been important since our government was founded and it always will be, as long as people do their duty by taking part in the single and easy process of registering to vote and voting. Government can make it a law to get people voting as if they did not, they would be sanctioned or giving benefits to people who vote. For instance, they could be given a bonus on their tax returns or something or could act as some kind of tax right off, like they do to people who give money to charity. There could also be better representation by giving a broad spectrum of different parties for people to be represented which could allow for people to feel like they are represented more accurately and may be get them more excited to vote (Brewster, 2005). There should also be forums or assemblies where people are being educated and enlightened on the importance and necessity of voting during elections for the survival of our democracy and overall national development. This can be champion by Civil Society, Non-governmental or Community Based Organisations in conjunction with media.

Your vote is your voice as a citizen, it is your opportunity to be heard, to hold elected officials accountable for their decisions and to have a say in important developmental issues that affect you and your community. On Election Day, every vote matter, therefore make it an instrument for our individual and societal development.

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