

Drivers of Voter's Preferences in Local Level Elections in Ghana: A Case Study of Ejisu Juabeng Municipality, since 2015

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Article History

Received: 02.10.2018

Accepted: 23.10.2018

Published: 30.10.2018



Abstract: The participation of citizens in governance is crucial to the development of every democratic society. Several scholars have worked on the various factors that influence voter preference in elections. However, only a few actually explore on the factors that influence voters' choice of candidate in local elections. This research sought to establish the preponderate factor that influences the decision for voters to elect or kick out public officials at the local level. The study also explains the why question on the election of a candidate to a local public office. In achieving these objectives, the research applied theoretical contestations to build different understanding. It also used Ejisu Juabeng Municipality in Ghana as the configurative case study. From the research analysis, it was realized that the leading factor in the local level election in Ghana since 2015 is within the justification framework of the rational choice model where priority is given to the examination of candidate's policies by voters. It was further revealed that voters understand the concept of the social contract which gives them the constitutional backing to demand accountability when needed. Voters further use elections as an avenue to reward or punish public officeholders for their service at the district and constituency level. The study opined and encourage Assembly Members to commence taking members of their electoral areas serious by formulating sound and feasible policies since electorates are likely to vote for candidates who appreciate the public good.

Keywords: Democracy, Decentralization, Election, Ejisu Juabeng Municipality, Governance, Voter's Preferences, Rational Choice Model, Social Contract.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy as a form of government is based, primarily, on the consent of the governed. Ampong [1] defines democracy as a form of government which gives electorates the voting power to choose their leaders who represent them in governance and answerable to them. This is possible in a free society where elections are freely and fairly conducted. By this, free and fair periodic elections have become the trusted means of establishing consent and approval between the voter and the voted for. Elections, in this case, refers to an organized political event where citizens with due qualifications give their consent by voting for a particular candidate into a public office either at the local, national, regional or international public sphere. According to Adejumbi [2], "it is the kernel of political accountability and a means of ensuring reciprocity and exchange between governors and the governed." It is further understood as the pact through which offices can be occupied solely based on voter's selective decision [3]. Also in his theoretical understanding on consent, John Locke asserted election as a means of making a political system accepted and recognized by the people, with a series of governments taking over leadership, and government institutions are connected to voters as a mechanism to make leadership

in governance accountable [4]. It is based on these collective understanding that elections are considered to be an essential mechanism through which electorates recognize their representatives and can, therefore, demand for public accountability through the due process.

The representatives of the people discuss public problems and conditions at the deliberative assembly broadly known to be the Parliament. But due to the complexity with regards to the resolution of public problems, the concept of decentralization has warmly been welcomed and necessitated at the local level governance. It has significantly contributed a shift in governance from the national level to a local level where the ordinaries are allowed to actively engage themselves and contribute their societal effort to the total development packages. This has led to several African constitutions such as the pre-fourth republican constitution of Ghana to create a district assembly system in 1988 legally known as Provincial National Defence Council Law 207 by an Act of Parliament. The justification behind this creation was to bring a highly centralized form of governance to the doorsteps of the masses and to inspire grassroots participation in the governance and development of the state.

To ensure a more decentralized power structure, the fourth republican constitution of Ghana created an avenue for the election of local government representatives (called Assembly Members) in the various districts of the state. They form the legislative arm of every district and have been entrusted with the powers to formulate by-laws, manage and regulate the district purse of the assembly and also engineer public development at the grass root level. This decentralization mechanism gives the ordinaries in the public sphere constitutional power to also contribute their quota to the overall national agendas.

Therefore the need for grassroots voters to elect local leaders is not an exception from their contributing factors. And as a result of that, there are various factors taken into consideration as voters decide who gets to represent them at the local assembly. These factors influence the choice of candidate(s) by voters. And to ensure a true democracy where leaders have the consent of those they represent, it is proper to examine the factors that influence the preference of voters at the local polls. These factors influence the voter's preference during district assembly elections.

Voter preference explains human conduct relative to social norms, the choices arrived at by electorates, and the way voters behave, which is informed by their thinking. In this context, preference refers to the electorate's choice of one candidate over the other in an election. Scholars make use of several variables in explaining why a voter will prefer one candidate to the other in an election. Some scholars suggest that the end result of political campaigns do influence voters' preference. At the initial stages of the electioneering period, many voters may simply be ill-informed and undecided. However, as campaign activities uncoil, indecisions about aspirants become less [5]. Although voters may have preferred candidates at the early stages, those may not be their final choice as they may be swayed later by a candidate's campaign messages.

On the others hand, some scholars also contest, that patronage politics or clientelism, personality, religion, economic conditions, and ethnicity are the main determinants of voter preference of most electorates. With these, electorate cast their vote on the basis of their loyalty or strong affiliation they have with a candidate. Also, some voters are political tourists and it becomes difficult to predict their candidate trust before going to the polls. Furthermore, some districts assemblies are often gerrymandered by their respective political giants within a particular geopolitical space leaving voters with no alternative to vote for other candidates since such candidates are less capable in terms of resources. In as much as local level elections afford electorates a more relative appreciation of their sovereignty and power over their representatives and

serve as a medium to demand accountability, there exist the need for this research to investigate into the predominated factor of electorate's predilections and the why behind it in the local level elections, with specific reference to the Ejisu Juaben Municipality in Ghana

DIGESTING THE SCHOLARLY PROPOSITIONS ON VOTER'S PREFERENCES

Political phenomena are not operationalized from a single theoretical understanding. Many scholars have diverse perspectives on how political events follow a particular trend in the public sphere. Political and other Social Sciences scholars from their respective knowledge-based academic discipline use a different set of models to explain the meaning to events. In this research, models of voter preference relevant to our study have been reviewed on the already existing academic works on factors that influence voter's preferences. Below is the review of the models with much explanatory power intended to promote the theoretical propositions on the factors that influence the decision and indecision of electorates to cast their vote for or not for a particular candidate(s).

Rational Choice Factors

Schelder [6] argued, that the phenomenon of elections since its inception has been closely tied to democracy. According to Schelder, commencement of the third wave of democratization from the global perspective gave birth to the variation of authoritarian rule. This means that the different forms of authoritarian rule are what has masqueraded into the current form of democracy. He clearly defines the current form of democracy to be free of the one-party system, no military or personal dictatorship and replacing it with a regime that holds elections, tolerate pluralism and interparty competition. The existing parameters set by Schelder explain the notion that the voter's choice of candidate is largely based on the source of information at their exposure in democracies. Inferentially, Schelder's arguments are associated with the rational choice theory. This is based on the ground that, voters are inspired by their store of information and this induces them to choose a particular candidate over the other. Also, elections can take any form but should be free and fair with voters openly exposed to all the norms, principles, procedures, rules and decisions regarding elections to enable them to make a comprehensive choice which will enable them to maximize their interest. Schelder believed that when all these aforesaid parameters are made available to voters, it gives voters the free will to judiciously choose a candidate who deems fit to be voted for in an election. Therefore it should be adhered to in all electoral jurisdictions.

Additionally, Mainwaring and Torcal [7] also help in explaining the rational choice narratives with the viewpoint that, electorates do make a critical

assessment of a candidate by taking into consideration the ideology and programmes of the candidate before a vote is cast in favor of a candidate. This assertion has been supported by Rabinowitz and McDonald [8] and Rabinowitz, McDonald and Listhaug [9] that the candidate's ideology and programme orientation increasingly influence the decision for voters to vote for a particular candidate. Some scholars also add up by positing that rational choice are made by the electorate after a thorough cost-benefit analysis has been made by the electorates. To these scholars, issues such proximity and patronage politics or clientelism do not carry much weight as compared to the electorates weighing the cost and benefit for voting or not voting for a candidate [10-15].

Behavioral Persuasion Factors

Mainwaring and Torcal [7] again mentioned that the choice of a voter is largely influenced by the very personal characteristics that a candidate possess. When these characters are admired and accepted by the voters it depicts the chances of a candidate winning the vote of the electorates. They continue the contestation by asserting that the character that shapes the personality of a candidate is used as a basis for voters to determine the can do and cannot do of candidates. By this, other scholars such as Silveira [16] viewed "personality voting" as a significant tool in many elections. That is to say, if a candidate is a respecter of the law, possess the needed charisma and is anti-bellucose, then there is a higher possibility for such candidate to emerge as the victor to assume a political position. Also, the conception of behavioral persuasion explains that voters' tendency to select a candidate over the other is highly centered on the personality of candidates which manifest in the conduct of a candidate on the political scene. From the political psychology perspective, Stroud, Glaser and Salovey [17] posited that one indicator with an inadequate devotion is the emotional exhibition of political candidates. In their work, it was realized that prejudice and earlier outlooks may interact with the emotions of candidates which will form the basis for they being elected by the electorates.

Sociological Factors

The sociological perspective of voter preference rests on the symbolic meaning that people develop their choices, behavior and social interaction based on their informal interpersonal relations. Family tie, education, culture, membership to an identifiable group, impact of social media and gender are all sociological factors that influence voters' preference in an election due to the levels of orientations each element comes with. This explains why certain voters place a candidate over the other based on ethnic lines and family ties [18]. Butler and Stoke [19] also identified certain social characteristics such as lifelong attachment to party candidate and identity as a factor of voter's choices. Other social factors such as economic assessment, religion, campaigns, abilities and

capabilities, and clientelism are all contributing to the act of electorates voting for specific candidates in an election [20]. These arguments were confirmed by Bratton, Bhavnani and Chen [21] through their thorough assessment of 16 countries. Their findings showed that competitive elections in Africa are influenced by both ethnic and economic voting. This is to say, that candidates tend to have more vote in an election based on their ethnic belongingness [22]. This, in Posner's point of view, sees an election as a channel through which voters consolidate with what is popularly known as "one of our own" to assume political offices with the intention of increasing their representation [23]. African countries like Zambia and Kenya are no exception from the pursuit of ethnic voting strategies [24]. Rosenfeld [25], also used the social contract conception to explain voter's choice in an election. Rosenfeld argued that social contract serves a legitimate ground for citizens' to be guided by rules and regulations such as voting, among others. Based on this contract, voters who are not satisfied with an incumbent candidate's performance usually use the election as a tool to end the continuity of public official who does deliver below social expectation.

Literatures reviewed depict that there is no specific or one factor to clarify voter's preference of a particular candidate over the other. It broadly cut across, ranging from careful examination of candidate, ethnic and religious affiliations and the performance of the candidate which is analyzed from the perspective of the social contract theory. However, none of these works of literature have focused on the predominating factor among all others on voter's preferences. This research therefore takes that as a lacuna for the purpose of this study. It also focused on why a particular factor predominates among the others by examining voter's choice in local elections with Ejisu Juaben Municipality as the unit of analysis.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study used non-experimental research design. With the non-experimental approach, data were obtained from both the primary and secondary sources. The study used questionnaires to obtain necessary primary data for the research. So, to help identify the predominant factors that influenced the preference of voters, the study employs both open-ended and close-ended questions as its major instruments. Also in the case of secondary sources, data were retrieved from all available media space both the electronic and print. The population of the study was all the constituents of the Ejisu-Juaben Municipal Assembly who have attained the age of eighteen (18) and above, and have registered with the Electoral Commission of Ghana as voters.

The sample frame for the study was the Electoral Commission of Ghana's electoral roll indicating the 2015 voters registers of the Ejisu Juaben Municipal Assembly. The research team gathered data

that is highly representative of the population by carefully choosing an inferential or a generalizable sample size. As posited by Cochran [26], to calculate a sample size from a given population, it is important to stipulate the marginal error. According to Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh [27], the error margin used to determine the sample size of a population in many research works is either 0.05 or 0.01. Krejcie and Morgan [28] also

noted that the acceptable error margin in social science research for continuous data categorical data is 0.03 and 0.05 respectively. Using Yamane's formula of 95% confidence level and an error margin of $\pm 5\%$, a sample size of 399 voters was computed from a total population of 112,720 registered voters in the Ejisu Juaben Municipality. The computation of the sample size is as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e*e)} \quad n = \frac{112720}{1+112720(0.05*0.05)} \quad n = 398.59 \quad n = 399.00$$

Note; N = Population, n = Sample size and e = Error margin.

The study used a simple random sampling technique to select all respondents for the research. Both male and females who have registered with the office of the Electoral Commission of Ghana as voters within the Ejisu Juaben Municipality were randomly selected without any form of bias. The respondents randomly selected for the purpose of the study were interviewed. This action was repeated in all instances until the required sample size was obtained. In analyzing the feedbacks of the respondents, the study used the Statistical Package of Social Sciences. Following the presentation of the responses to the specific instruments, a thorough discussion of the findings was carried out in light of the theoretical framework of the study and the propositions and finding of other scholars as captured in already reviewed works of literature. The research was conducted with respect to the set rules within the framework of the American Psychological Association. By this, the respondent's participation in the field survey conducted was voluntary and out of their free will. Respondents were fully made aware of the importance of the exercise that they are participating in and they consented to do so. Respondents were also informed about the confidentiality of their responses given as they participate in the exercise. The research team ensures all respondents that their responses will not be divulged to any person but would be used purely for an academic motive which establishes the basis of whole research. Finally, respondents were informed about their free will to or not to respond to questions based on their personal reasons.

Presentation of results and analysis

This section presents an analysis of three hundred and ninety-nine (399) responses from respondents who were randomly sampled from the Ejisu-Juaben Municipality of Ashanti Region, Ghana. This analysis seeks to identify the predominating factors that influenced the preference of voters in the Ejisu-Juaben Municipality and also established why that factor predominates. The analysis is categorized into two main folds. The first part analyses the demographic characteristics of the respondents. These include their gender, educational background religion, and ethnic affiliations. The second part of analyses focuses on the

predominant factor and the voter's rationale behind their preferences to that factor. The data and its analysis is as follows:

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

This part of the data gives a general idea of the social background and demographic features of those questioned and by inference, the area of study. The study neither limited nor restricted to any particular gender. The table below shows that questionnaires were administered to a total of 399 respondents. From the gender perspective, 210 representing 52.7% were males and 189 representing 47.3% females. It was realized in the study that the gender numerical differences of the total respondent survey was as a result of interest diversities. In this case, more males were interested in participating in the survey than females because the topic under discussion was political in nature.

With respect to the responses collected on educational background, it was realized that a good number of respondents (162 representing 40.7%) have attained tertiary education. They either attended a University, Polytechnic, or Training College education. This was followed by those who fall under the category of Secondary education. A total of 115 respondents, forming 28.7% mentioned that they have attained secondary education. Also, 69 respondents (17.3%) had basic education and 53 respondents (representing 13.3%) indicated that they had no formal education. The issue of some respondents having no formal education had no significant impact on the whole survey conducted. This is because the instruments were asked in a language that these category of respondents understood perfectly. Religiously, a greater number of 306 representing 76.7% mentioned being an affiliate of the Christendom as their religion. Muslims constituted 69 (17.3%) of the total respondents. Also, 21 (5.3%) and 3 (0.7%) representing the Traditional religion and other religious identities respectively. In terms of ethnic belongingness, 279 (70%) of the respondents were Akan, 43 (10.7%) of them are of Mole-Dagbani descent, 35 (8.7%) being Ewes. Both Ga-Adangbe descent and the Guans all had an equal number of 21 representing 5.3% each. The figure-1 captures the

statistical description of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents surveyed.

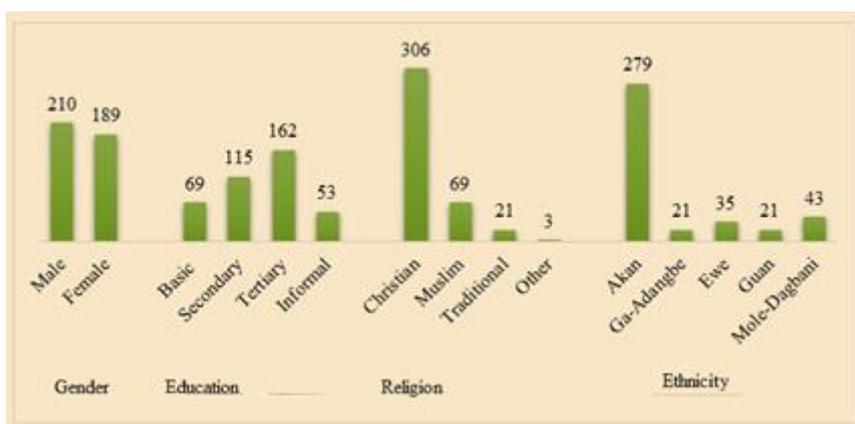


Fig-1: Socio - Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

Source: Field Survey; April, 2018

Factors that Informs Respondent’s (Voter’s) Choice of Candidate at Local / District Level Election

Majority of the respondents lent credence to the fact that policies of the candidates are the chief driving factor that influenced their choice of candidate in local or district level elections. From the field survey, 49.3% of respondents confirmed that their main influencing factor in settling on a candidate to give their support is based on the policies of candidates. This confirms the proposition of Mainwaring and Torcal [7] that voters do make a critical examination on the various programmes that candidate intend to do when voted into office before they make the final decision. Other respondents constituting 23.3%, 14.1%, and 13.3% also attested to the fact that their vote for a candidate is influenced by the personality, benefit and group affiliation of the candidate respectively. With personality, respondent concluded that it is the character of the candidate that matters most to them. This is because candidates with good standing behavior are the ones that need to be given the platform to lead the various assemblies within Ejisu Juaben Municipality. This supported the argumentation of Silveira [16] that the personality of a candidate is a significant tool in many elections.

Also, respondents hold the view of voting for candidates that they benefit or can benefit from. This was because most of the candidates voted in the assembly’s offices and positions do use the social resources to better themselves with less or no consideration to the ordinaries who voted them to the respective public positions. So the only means they (respondents) to also have their share of the assembly’s resources is to demand something whether in cash or in kind from a candidate before they fully agree to vote for the candidate. This result gathered from the respondents, therefore, reject the hypothesis of scholars such as Budge [10], Cox [11] and Westholm [15] who posited that clientelism or patronage politics carry less weight in voter’s decision to vote for or not to vote for a particular candidate. Finally, less number of the respondents confirmed that they vote for a candidate based on the religious or ethnic affiliations. The comments provided by respondents depicted that Ejisu Juaben Municipality is a multicultural space. Respondents were much interested in a candidate who can deliver public good and interest, not on the grounds of specific identity. The result is shown in the figure -2.

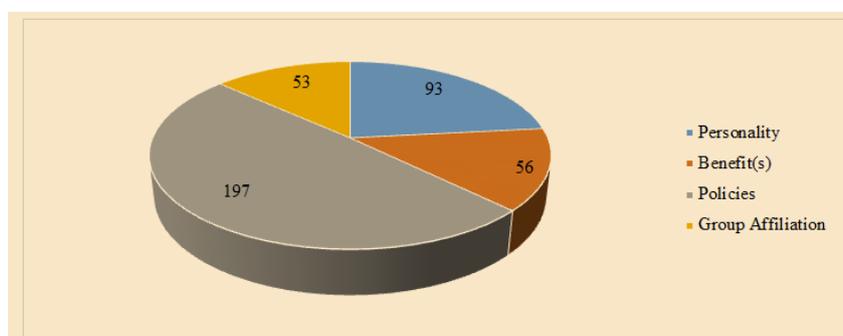


Fig-2: Factors that Informs Voter’s Choice of Candidate at Local / District Level Election.

Source: Field Survey; April, 2018

Voters Policy Scale of Preferences in Pre - Local Level Elections

A critical look at our findings confirmed that choices of most voters during local level elections in Ejisu Juaben Municipality since 2015 were influenced the prioritization of candidate's policy preference. This means that most voters within the Ejisu Juaben Municipality do settle on specific policies of candidates before they cast their vote. On why the specification of candidate's policies was of a greater importance to most of the respondents, they mentioned that they vote representatives into the assembly to represent their interest and lobby development to the areas. Therefore, the policies presented by the candidates are critical to them. They prefer to vote for candidates with sound and achievable police that meet the public needs of the people. To them, the policies mentioned by the candidates indicate to them the areas intention that candidates will focus and lobby when voted to take Assembly positions.

It is in this same vein, according to respondents (voters) will not hesitate to vote out any assembly member who does not execute his/her mandate to the public satisfaction. Respondents also stated to embark on a constitutionally permitted peaceful demonstration to make their grievances and displeasures known when elected assembly officials do not deliver their duties. Respondents mentioned that the very serious problems ranging from education, security, market, sanitation, road and drainage issues, and recreational areas are confronting their constituencies. So they need representatives who will champion their needs at the Municipal Assembly. Hence, they will not hesitate to vote out or take action against incumbents who are becoming dormant in their roles as representatives. The figure - 3 shows the various policy problems confronted by the people of Ejisu Juaben Municipality thereby resulting in the prioritization of policy preferences in the pre-election period and voting moments.

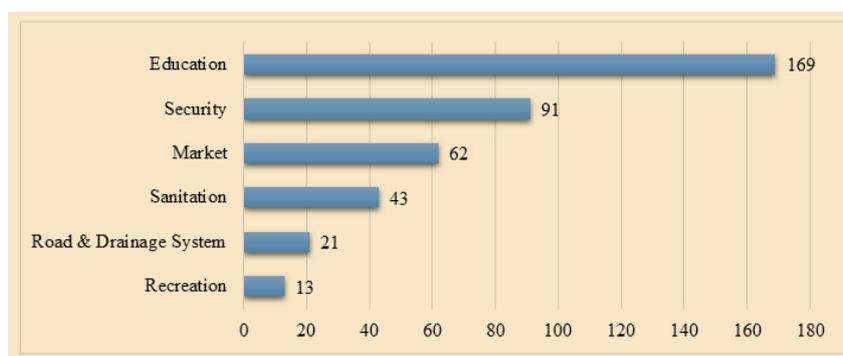


Fig-3: Voters Policy Scale of Preferences in Pre - Local Level Elections.
Source: Field Survey; April, 2018

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The local level elections in Ghana have greatly contributed to the process of decentralization. It has given meaning to governance before the grassroots and has promoted grassroots participation in governance since they have the electoral powers to vote in and out of public officials at the local level. This electioneering process has helped in eliminating a political orientation that fosters withdrawal or disinterest in national politics.

It has also brought out the need to conduct this study to assess the predominant factor that influences voter preference during local level elections. We used rational choice, social contract, and behavioural persuasion theories as the foundation in the analysis. The observation of our analysis through our findings from the field survey depicted that, candidate's policies are the major justification of voter's preferences. This help voters to hold their public officials at the Ejisu Juaben Municipality accountability to the assembly's growth and development. Since public officials in the Ghana and Ejisu Juaben Municipality to be precise are elected on the basis of a social contract, electorates tend

to use elections as a major tool to dethrone elected public officers who do not deliver their responsibilities to meet public expectations.

The study therefore make some recommendations to aspiring and elected public officials in Ghana and other part of the world where elections are used as a major mechanism to run public management and administration. First, elected assembly members should take their communities serious and live up to expectation since voters have now proven that they will use the polls as an avenue to punish or reward the performance of their representatives. Also, candidates in local elections should treat their manifestoes seriously and adopted sound and feasible policies. This is because voters are increasingly basing their candidate election preferences on the campaign messages of the candidates. Finally candidates and elected officials should not focus their all on their personality or popularity since the voting wisdom of electorates is continuously inclining and shifting away from such criteria.

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