



Determinants of Voting Behaviour in Ghana

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Background

In the last few decades, many countries all over the world and Africa in particular have embarked on competitive democratic politics. By the end of the 1990s, many of Africa's ruling elite did not only recognize but also accepted the dictum that political legitimacy required a popular vote in multiparty elections (Bratton, 2013). The trend towards institutionalization of competitive democratic politics in Ghana and Africa allows us to engage in an in-depth study of voting behaviour. Obviously, the Africa of today is very different from that of two or three decades ago when Horowitz (1985) described elections as nothing more than "ethnic census".

In this paper, we define democracy as a political system characterized by popular participation, competition for executive office, and institutional check on power (Siegle et al., 2004). It also refers to an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote (Gerring et al., 2005). Simply put, democracy involves how citizens express views physically or the general population is empowered to control their decision making process (Minier, 2001). Voting behavior is defined as a set of personal electoral activities, including participation in electoral campaigns, turnout at the polls, and choosing for whom to vote (Bratton, 2013).

The big question then is what makes voters in Ghana decide? Is it evaluative rationales such as characteristics and accomplishments of candidates, performance of government, and policy platforms of parties or non-evaluative factors such as political affiliation, ethnic or family ties? Touching upon another classic distinction in studies of voting behaviour, the question is whether voters vote retrospectively to "throw the rascals out," or vote



prospectively, on the basis of promises? There has been virtually no long-term tracking of these fleeting issues, and therefore our survey will be dedicated to the collection of data about voting behavior and reasons that respondents gave for voting for one party or the other. This study thus complements other studies done on Ghana but it differs from the previous studies as it uses larger dataset of 2042 respondents from all the ten regions in the country. The results are more representative of the actual situation and the data also allows us to identify particular trends of voting behavior, if any, over the study period. Obviously, seeking to identify trends is consistent with the political economy literature that links voting behavior to economic business cycles and shows that ideological change is endogenous to income growth rates. For example, voters are likely to be more liberal in prosperous times and more conservative during hard times. After all, it is possible to argue that this research is critical observing that voting behaviour process is not always rational: people do not always act rationally or in their best economic interests (Harding, 2013). In this paper, however, the focus is on the determinants of the vote using rational choice model.

In the sections that follow, we present the theoretical and empirical basis of voting behavior. The methodology is then described and the data collected are analyzed. The findings of the study are discussed and concluding remark offered.

Theoretical and Empirical Literature

Many scholars have employed variety of analytical models to examine voting behaviour question empirically. Generally, three main theoretical perspectives have been used to explain voting behavior in the literature: Sociological theory or the Columbia School (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Lipset 1960), Psychosocial or the Michigan School (Campbell et al. 1960) and the Rational Choice perspectives (Downs 1957; Fiorina, 1981). The sociological perspective shows that long-held factors (social characteristics) such as socio-economic variables, religion, and location are key determinants of voting behavior (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). The assumption here is that majority of people vote according to their original political predisposition. The problem with this theory, however,



is that if vote choice was determined solely by the stable sociological factors, election results will remain unchanged for a very long time.

The Michigan school or the psychosocial model is complementary to the Columbian model as it helps to explain how electoral change occurs. It provides a framework that combines sociological and psychological (so called psychosocial approach) to explain the vote choice. The psychological need refers to the need of individuals to belong to or be identified with a group or the collective, in this case political party. The central concept of the Michigan School of thought is political affiliation or partisanship, where party identification is loosely understood as a socio-psychological product of family and social group ties (Dalton, 2001). In other words, party identification shapes the evaluation of candidates, issues, and the expected capacity of parties to solve problems (Erdmann, 2007).

Perhaps the greatest approach in voting analysis, moving toward a parsimonious approach, has been the rational choice model with two main perspectives. These are: Evaluation and Non-evaluation perspectives (Lindberg & Morrison, 2008). Whereas the evaluative voting rationale is based on voters' judgment of the performance of parties or representatives on policies or universalistic public goods, non-evaluative perspective is driven by clientelistic voting based on personal affective ties of patronage, family, clan, and ethnic considerations. When there is a promise or implicit agreement about personal favors or goods to be exchanged in return for political loyalty that a clientelistic relationship is established. In the words of Lindberg and Morrison (2008), public goods such as schools, roads, and electricity for the community can be discussed in terms of pork barrel politics.

Many empirical studies have been used to support the various theoretical perspectives. The implication is that voting behavior is so complex that no one model is complete in itself (Roth 1998). In support of this view, de Vries et al. (2011) argue that one of the most influential findings of the voting behavior literature of the past two decades is the realization that the clarity of the domestic institutional context influences the relationship between economic perceptions and the vote choice. For example, Erdmann



(2007) in a study of Zambia reports that ethnicity matters for voter alignment and even more so for party affiliation. The survey results indicate that ethnicity or ethno-political identity matters but certainly not the only factor that accounts for election outcomes. Erdmann (2007) concludes that ethnicity provides the basic social cleavage for voting behaviour and the formation of parties and politicians are more likely to direct resources both public and private to their co-ethnics. However, in a study of Uganda, Conroy-Krutz (2013) shows that goods distribution and ethnicity become less important as constituents gain more political information. He claims that in such situations, distributive politics for the purposes of gaining votes becomes even risky. This finding is consistent with Dendere's (2013) observation that the Africa we have today is very different from what was described as ethnic consensus by Horowitz (1985) 30 years ago.

Similarly, Andrews and Inman (2009), using the 2005 Round three (3) Afrobarometer survey of seven African countries rated as free, report that while ethnic ties affect vote choice in Africa, retrospective evaluations of economic performance are equally important. Erdmann (2007) has also noted that the relevance of ethnicity for the formation of party systems and voter alignment is not a uniform pattern across Africa. In light of the recent findings in many African countries, Camp (2010) suggests that ethnicity should not be abandoned as a determinant of the vote choice but the way it is looked at must obviously be refined. In support of the Andrews and Inman (2009) study, Lindberg and Morrison (2008) reported that 'clientelist and ethnic predisposed voting are minor features of the Ghanaian electorate. Lindberg and Morrison find that voters' evaluative behavior is related to the actual or expected performance of the candidates and not politicians or governments' ability to provide private and public goods to its constituents. Dendere (2013) in a study of Zimbabwe, challenges the commonly accepted notion that African elections are mere "ethnic censuses" showing that voters make their choices based on policy and economic preferences underlying a preferred ideology. Thus, political preferences are shaped by institutions, economic conditions, and personality.

In a related study of the Ghanaian electoral competition in the 1990s, Perre and Mesemple-Somps (2011) reported that public transfers seem irrational as the ruling government invests more in opposition districts (especially, where the leading opposition



members are very powerful) to avoid political agitation originating in these districts. Additionally, they find evidence that leading National Democratic Congress (NDC) (then in opposition) members' districts that vote the most for the NDC received more funds through some channels at the beginning of NPP rule after the year 2000, when the NDC lost power.

In a recent study of Ghana, however, Harding (2013) using data based on the 2004 and 2008 elections, reports that when the provision of public goods (in this case roads) can be attributed to political action, it is likely to be affected by electoral support especially in the rural areas. This is not surprising as recent studies (Bossuroy, 2011; Kopřil and Varvažovská, 2011; Dendere, 2013) do show that rural voters differ in their understanding of democracy, policy preferences, access to independent media and knowledge about opposition political parties, all of which influence support for or against the ruling party.

Ghana is a good test case of voting behavior and the rationale of the African voter because the country recently emerged from long-term military rule to sustain a reasonably successful democratization. Six successive multiparty elections since 1992 constitutes the longest period in its history over which we can observe voting patterns. It is believed that the study will deepen our understanding of electoral politics in Ghana.

Methodology

The study is designed mainly as a representative nationwide sample survey. The first stage of sampling included all the 10 regions of Ghana. In each region, one-tenth of the districts were selected using a combination of probability and non-probability sampling techniques. A district in the regional capitals of all the 10 regions was purposively selected to represent the urban population of the sample and all major tribes in the region. The other districts outside the regional capital were randomly selected using simple random technique. The regional distribution of the sample of 2042 was proportional to the results of the 2010 National Population and Housing Census. Considering time and cost



of the study only two focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized from urban (GIMPA) and rural (Afram Plains) areas. In all, 16 people with diverse background were carefully selected to participate in the FGDs. Eight participants were selected for each group. To qualify to be selected as a participant of the FGDs, the person should vote in at least four presidential elections

Key Findings

We considered the respondents as rational and responsible actors who are knowledgeable about the reasons for their voting behaviour. The respondents (2042) were therefore asked to select one out of seventeen (17) factors the most important factors that determined their vote and the results are reported in Table 1. The five most important factors of the vote choice are campaign message (20.5%), human relations of the presidential candidate (15.5%), educational policy (12.8%), personality of candidate (9.9%), and performance of the ruling government (8.4%). All these factors (58.7%) are regarded as evaluative perspectives. On the hand the five least important factors are regional background of candidate (0.4%), gifts from candidate (0.7%), gender of candidate (0.8), religious affiliation (1.0%) and ethnic background of the candidate (1.3%). These are all (4.2%) non-evaluative perspectives.



Table 1: The Most Important factor that influenced voters' choice

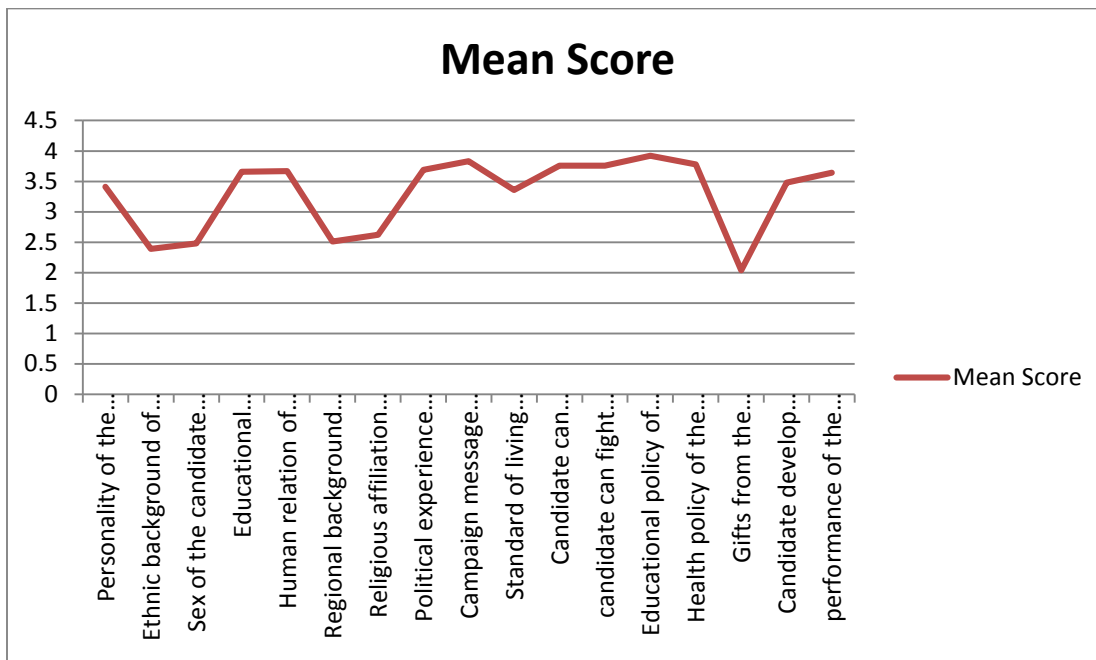
Factors	Frequency	Percent
Personality of the candidate	203	9.9
Ethnic background of the candidate	27	1.3
Sex of the candidate	16	.8
Educational background of the candidate	85	4.2
Human relation of the candidate	321	15.7
Regional background of the candidate	9	.4
Religious affiliation of the candidate	20	1.0
Political experience of the candidate	81	4.0
Campaign message	425	20.8
Standard of living	61	3.0
Candidate can provide employment	123	6.0
Candidate can fight corruption	97	4.8
Educational policy	264	12.9
Health policy	61	3.0
Gifts from candidates or party	14	.7
Candidate can develop my locality	61	3.0
The performance of the ruling party	174	8.5
Total	2042	100.0

Source: Survey Data, 2014.



The respondents were further asked to rate the 17 factors the extent to which they influenced their choice of candidates. In each case, the respondents had to indicate how important (1 least important and 5 most important) they rated each of these issues. The summary mean scores for the total sample are summarized in Figure 1. Clearly, non-evaluative factors such as ethnic, gender, regional, religious backgrounds of the candidate and gifts from the candidates were rated below the mean score of three points. However, all the evaluative factors were rated above the mean score of three points. These factors included: Educational background, campaign message, ability to fight corruption and policies.

Figure 1: Summary of results for the total sample.



Source: Survey Data, 2014

Evidence from informal focus group discussions indicated that the two major political parties, the NPP and the NDC usually castigated the policies and programs of the other party while in opposition. For example, the NPP campaign message on health in 2000 was intended to replace out-of pocket payments at the point health service of use. Similarly, the NDC in its campaign in 2008 described the NPP's annual premium payment as denial of access health service to the poor and promised to implement a policy of one-



time premium payment for persons in the informal sector. The NPP and the NDC have benefited from their campaign message on issues such as zero tolerance for corruption, free education, national health insurance, and one-time premium payment. Many analysts (Ayee, JRA(2011; Boafo-Arthur, 2006) claim that the NPP's slogan "***Hwe wa sitana mu na nu tu aba pa***", which simply means that "examine your life and vote appropriately;" if your condition is good then vote ruling party but if not then vote for change was successful in convincing voters to vote the party into power in 2008. Similarly, the NDC's slogan of the need for the country to move forward in the right direction was critical in helping the NDC to retain power in 2012. These results provide support to van de Walle (2003) observation that political parties tackle substantive issues during African elections, but generally voice them through valence appeals rather than by staking out distinct positions. In other words, the basic difference between the two parties is more of how to achieve the objective rather than an ideological difference. In 2012, the key campaign issue was on education, with the NDC boasting of increasing educational access and the NPP promising free education if it wins power.

The findings from the respondents indicate that evaluative voting far exceeds non evaluative voting in Ghana. The important role of the campaign message which every one out of five voters indicated is supported by Godbout and Belanger (2007) and Nordin (2010), who claim that a party's campaign message helps to define issues about the economy and explain to the electorate which candidate is better able to manage the challenges confronting the citizenry and the economy at large. This observation therefore does not support studies that show lack of position taking on issues or an absence of substantive electoral debate in Africa (van de Walle 2003).

Conclusion

In the context of studying voter behaviour in emerging democracy, this study is a significant research that reinforces the rational choice perspectives. Non-evaluative perspective issues such as ethnicity; gender; religious affiliation; and gifts from candidates or the party, still exist but did not play any significant role. Voters' behaviour in Ghana is largely determined by evaluative rationales such as education, health and



employment policies of the parties. In his seminal work in 1957, Downs argued that voters in established democracies choose a party or candidate on the basis of the benefits that they are likely to enjoy when that party or candidate takes power. In other words, electoral choices are based on the policies and philosophies of the parties. There is therefore evidence to suggest that Ghana is moving towards an established democracy.

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