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Influence of Political Factors on Voter Abstention in by-Elections in Kenya

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Abstract:

The purpose of the study was to investigate how political factors influences voter abstention in by-elections in Kenya. The study was pegged on the evidence of by-election that took place in Kakamega County between 1992 and 2017. The study was guided by Economic theory of democracy. Survey research design was used to guide the study. The target population consisted of registered voters in Kakamega County as per 2017 Independent Electoral Boundaries Commission voter register, County Returning Officer of Kakamega County and 2 experts on election matters were used as respondents. Census, proportionate, convenient and purposive sampling techniques were adopted for the study. The questionnaires were used to collect information from voters while interview schedules were used to collect information from County Returning Officer and experts on election matters. The study established that absence of presidential candidates, reduced political competition, dominance of a political party in a particular region were factors that negatively impacted on voter turnout. The study recommends for Independent Electoral Commission and other civic bodies to mount aggressive Civic education during by-election just as general election as a way of containing voter apathy.

Keywords: Abstention, By-election, Influence

1. Introduction

The central element of democracy was seen as the one that recognized the 'rule by the people' to be the cornerstone and founding principle of the dictates of democracy. This position is anchored on both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). According to The ICCPR 'everyone has the ability to be engaged in the governance of own state, either directly or through elected representative. Democracy is aimed at building people's abilities to demand for accountability of authorities for the undertaking of decisions and actions that may have been agreed upon. Free and fair elections, if carried out regularly and competitively, tend to enhance achievement of the will of the people (Diamond & Myers, 2000).

In majority of Countries, periodic and regular elections are regarded as a foundation of democracy. Elections lays a solid foundation for democracy, grounding for core values of political accountability and equality of the governance (Sisk, 2017). Democracy serves a function of setting the agenda-matter which is a foundation for decision making and deciding the outcome of decision-making process, decision for adoption or rejection of a policy-(Githinji, 2019).

The ideals of the general will be expressed in the legislative power of the people are revealed in the French Revolution's celebrated theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau's seminal work, *The Social Contract*; conceiving of society as the construct of free calculating individuals bent on maximizing their own interests. In the same vein, Bentham (1817) wondered what principle could surpass the will of the people acting politically for themselves in pursuit of individual common good (Melossi, 1990)

Writing on election, Thomassen (2014) observe that election in any democratic country serves a number of functions:

- Legitimization of governance-The legitimacy of rulers in a democratically ideal state is exercised through fair electoral process devoid corruption
- Practice of accountability-Accountability of leadership to the citizens for provision of development, security and other critical services
- Choice of representation-Leaders are ideally elected by voters on the basis of their ideology-what they portray to represent such as incentives of development and sanctions of performance
- Exercise of voice of voters-The idea of voice grants meaning to the ideals of principles of political equality and popular exercise in control of democracy which is critical to electoral process

Despite election offering opening up democratic space, voter turnout in elections Worldwide vary from Country to Country and season to season. Fowler, (2013) observes that Election outcomes and public policies in developed democracies with optional turnout are quite different from the counterfactual world where everyone participates in voting. According to International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (2016) Voter participation is one of the critical pointers of how citizens partake in the control of their nation with higher voter participation in most cases a symbol of the vitality of democracy, while lower participation generally linked to voter apathy and mistrust of the political practice. For instance, the report of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) titled 'Society at Glance' of 2019, turnout in elections vary from region to region. For instance, turnout rates in parliamentary elections are over 80 percent in Turkey, Belgium, Denmark and Sweden, but less than 50 percent in Chile, Switzerland and Luxembourg. However, the report observed that in most OECD countries, there has been generally a drop in electoral involvement over the previous three decades between early 1990 and the late 2010, participation in parliamentary elections across the OECD member states which reduced from 75 to 65 percent on average.

African election data base (2011) reveals that most of African countries have been registering drop in voter turnout in in recently years. For instance, voter turnout in Senegal dropped from 70.6 percent in 2007 to 50.0 percent in 2012 election, Seychelles recorded a drop from 85.9 percent in 2007 to 85.3 percent in 2011 with Zimbabwe registering 44.3 percent in 2009 from 63.5 percent turnout of in 2005 while in Tanzania turnout in elections has been varying from and from time to time. In the election in 1995, 2000 and 2005 turnout in election stood at 76, 84.4 and 72.4 percent respectively.

Despite opening up of democratic space allowing voters to exercise their democratic right in 1992, with repeal of section 2A which allowed multiparty, not all voters exercised their democratic right of voting in Kenya since voting is optional. As such, voter turnout keeps on varying from time to time depending on the nature of election with lowest voter turnout as depicted in Figure 1.

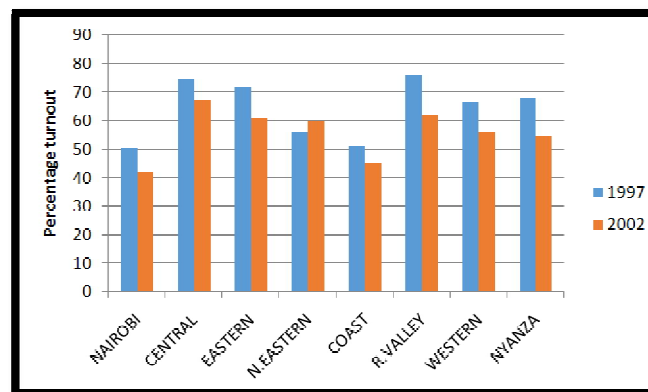


Figure 1: Showing Voter Turnout during 1997 and 2002 General Election in Kenya

Source: Africa Program • Center for Strategic and International Studies

(https://www.csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/notes_0301b.pdf)

As Figure 1 shows, voter turnout has kept on varying with some regions even recording turnout of less than 50 percent as the case of Nairobi in 2002. A high level of voter apathy therefore denies citizens of a country in popular participation in political decision-making which is an important aspect of working democracy.

Similarly, comparison between voter turnouts in general elections and by-elections shows a wide discrepancy. For example according to Africa Program Centre for Strategic and International Studies (1997), voter turnout in general election was 68.4% whereas the by-election held in Kisauni (Dec.2004), voter turnout was 21.2% (<https://mambo.hypotheses.org/356>).

By- elections, in Kenya are the second major elections held after general elections. These elections normally come in between general elections in certain regions and are caused by a number of factors. Githinji (2019), outlines the following as the circumstances under which by-election may be held in Kenya;

- Death of elected member for seats safe for Governor and president where the position is assumed by the deputy
- Resignation of elected member in writing addressed to the speaker
- Absence for 8 consecutive sittings in the house without written permission from the speaker and without proper justification for the absence
- Removal from the office due to violation of article 80 of the Constitution of Kenya (Violation of chapter 6 on leadership and integrity)
- Disqualified on nullification of election on grounds specified under article 193(2) (invalidation by court due to election petition)
- Unsound mind rendering one unfit to discharge his/her duties
- Recall by electorate due to unsatisfactory performance
- Conviction for a period exceeding 6 months

By-elections in Kenya give citizens the second chance of electing their political leaders as a result of a vacuum that may arise from death of elected member, resignation of elected member, removal from the office due to violation of article

80 of the Constitution of Kenya and nullification of election by the Court of law among other issues. As such by-elections give citizens opportunity to fill the created vacuum.

Despite poor voter turnout in by-elections, most electorates have been crying about underdevelopment of their regions, a blame that could be traced to poor political leadership. This situation is a clear pointer on the side of the electorate that they do not understand that they stand at the center of the whole issue of determining political representation, hence level of development. Voter apathy during by-elections in comparison to general election could be a pointer to some insurmountable barriers to voter participation in by-elections, a problem that needs to be addressed. Addressing the problem of poor voter turnout in by elections is only possible by understanding of the causes of the same so that voter participation could be enhanced as a way of democratic representation. This study therefore, offers a critical analysis of causes of voter abstention in by-elections in Kenya on the basis of evidence from by-elections in Kakamega County between 1992 and 2017.

The study was guided by Economic Theory of Democracy (ETD) advanced by Anthony Downs (1957). According to this theory the decision by an individual to participate in an election is a product of the following function:

$$R = PB - C$$

Where R=Expected utility (return from voting)

P=Probability that one's' vote will be decisive

B= The benefits that are derived from undertaking a successful election that come as a result of election of an alternative or a candidate.

C=Cost of voting

According to ETD, an individual only turns up for voting when the expected returns from voting(R) turns up to be positive.

1.1. Specific Objectives of the Study

The study sought to establish the following in relation to Kakamega County;

- Find out the influence of the nature of candidate on voter abstention in by-election
- Establish the extent to which aggressive campaign by political parties' impact on voter abstention in by-election
- Determine how dominance of a political party of in a certain region contribute to voter abstention in by-election
- Examine how the level of rivalry among political parties contribute to voter abstention in by-election

1.2. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions

- What is the influence of the nature of candidate on voter abstention in by-election?
- Do what extent has aggressive campaign by political parties impacted on voter abstention in by-election
- How has dominance of a political party of in a certain region contributed to voter abstention in by-election?
- How has the level of rivalry among political parties contributed to voter abstention in by-election?

1.3. Research Methodology

The study was based on Survey research design. The target population consisted of 743,763 registered voters in Kakamega County as per 2017 IEBC voters register, 1 Returning officer of Kakamega County and two (2) experts on election matters. These made a total of 743,766 respondents that was targeted for the study.

2. Findings and Discussion

A total of 400 questionnaires were equally distributed in 12 Constituencies in the study region out of which 385 responded. This represented a response rate of 96.25 percent. This response was good enough to allow for making of a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the survey conducted. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) observes that a response rate of 70% and above to be excellent for use for further statistical analysis.

2.1. Influence of the Nature of the Candidate on Voter Abstention

First the study sought to establish whether the nature of candidate has ability to enhance one's information on the need to turn out and vote. Voter respondents' responses reflected in Table 1

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| SA | 172 | 42.4 | 44.7 | 44.7 |
| A | 213 | 52.5 | 55.3 | 100.0 |
| Total | 385 | 94.8 | 100.0 | |

Table 1: Response on Influence of the Nature of Candidate on Voter Turnout during by Election

Findings in Table 1 reveal that all (100%) voter respondents were in agreement that the nature of candidate has influence on decision making on ability of the voter to participate in voting activity.

Affirming this position, Ee1 stated

----the nature of candidate such as tribe has an influence on the level of voter turnout. You know in Kenya, people mainly belief that when they have their own person in a particular position, it is a chance or a ladder for accessing certain privileges. They believe that leadership are meant to assist own people to 'eat' and as such ones' 'own' tend to turn up in large numbers to enable their 'own' to win election. Some voters from Tribes that may not have their 'own'

contesting may not turn up to participate in voting as they may feel that they do not have anything to 'lose' or 'gain' by not turning up. That is why you may have witnessed high voter turnout in presidential election for some tribes that have been presenting presidential candidates in certain regions.

Though general election was not under the focus of the study, the question was meant to establish whether absence of presidential candidates during by-election could have a bearing on voter turnout. The responses are reflected in Table 2.

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| SA | 169 | 41.6 | 43.9 | 43.9 |
| A | 216 | 53.2 | 56.1 | 100.0 |
| Total | 385 | 94.8 | 100.0 | |

Table 2: Responses on Whether Some Voters during General Elections Just Turn Out to Vote Because of Presidential Candidates

As reflected in Table 2, all voter respondents (100%) either agreed or strongly agreed that some voters turnout to vote during general elections because of their interests in certain presidential elections. As if to confirm this position Ee2 stated:

-----indeed, you don't need to go far to confirm that some voters just turn out to vote during general election because of their interest in certain presidential candidates. Remember this is an issue that has been part of concerns that opposition parties have been ignorantly raising when disputing results on account that the presidential votes may have been above governors' vote, MPs or Senators in certain regions. This is true for some people who work in other parts of the Country outside their ancestral homes. Given that voting in Kenya is mainly tribal, such voters may be least concerned with local representation as they are not locals and will always be alert wanting to vote for their presidential candidates. How do you expect such a voter to turnout in absence of his/her preferred presidential candidate during by-elections? By the way expect similar trend in the event of presidential re run off.

This may imply that absence of presidential candidates makes voting less attractive to some voters, hence reduced voter turnout during by elections.

This finding is in agreement with findings of Archer (2009) who established that Kenyans vote ethnically mainly because they believe it will support their economic interests, and that ethnicity serves as a transitional variable or an epiphenomenon that in numerous cases works as a means to an end.

2.2. Establish the Extent to Which Aggressive Campaign by Political Parties' Impact on Voter Abstention in By-Election

The second objective of the study sought to establish the extent to which aggressive campaign by political party's impact on voter abstention. However, first the sought to establish whether there was any difference between the intensity of campaigns by political parties during general election and by elections. The study started by gauging gauge the level of awareness on the influence of campaign of political parties on voter turnout in any election. A question that postulated that; *'Aggressive campaigns by political parties during elections influences voter turnout'* was put to voter respondents and scored. The findings are shown in Table 3.

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| SA | 320 | 46.6 | 46.6 | 46.6 |
| A | 292 | 42.6 | 42.6 | 89.2 |
| D | 41 | 6.0 | 6.0 | 95.2 |
| SD | 33 | 4.8 | 4.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 686 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 3: Response on Influence of Aggressive Campaign of Political Parties on Turnout in Election

Table 3 reveals that all voters' respondents were in agreement that the level of campaigns by political parties in any election has significant influence on the rate of voter turnout. This finding showed that the respondents were fully informed to have ability to evaluate the campaign activities of political parties during general election.

Voter questionnaire had an item that sought comparison between campaigns of political parties that stated, *'During by elections, political parties do not mount aggressive campaigns compared with general elections leading to low turnout?'*

Voter respondents' level of agreement is reflected in Table 4

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| SA | 115 | 29.9 | 29.9 | 29.9 |
| A | 185 | 48.1 | 48.2 | 78.1 |
| D | 9 | 2.3 | 2.3 | 80.5 |
| SD | 25 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 87.0 |
| Total | 50 | 13.0 | 13.0 | 100.0 |
| | 384 | 99.7 | 100.0 | |

Table 4: Level of Agreement Reduced Campaign by Political Parties during By-Election Compared to General Election

Table 4 reveals that majority of (over 75 percent) voter respondents were in agreement that there is normally reduced campaign by political parties during by elections as compared to general elections. This is likely to imply that low voter turnout during by-election is as a result of reduced sensitization of political parties to their various followers to turn up and participate in the election by voting. Writing on campaign and voter turnout, Akhter (2014), observes that the extent to which political parties mount election campaigns has ability to influence voter turnout and voting behavior as election campaigns are meant to convince voters to believe that their interests will be best served by the party or party candidate.

2.3. Influence of Dominance of a Political Party of in a Certain Region Contribute to Voter Abstention in By-Election

Thirdly the study sought to establish the influence of dominance of political parties in particular region on voter abstention. A positive statement postulating that '*In by election where a particular political party is dominant voter turnout may be low since most potential voters assume that the candidate to win election is already known*' was put to voter respondents and scored. The results are shown in Table 5

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| SA | 42 | 10.9 | 10.9 | 10.9 |
| A | 252 | 65.5 | 65.5 | 76.4 |
| D | 32 | 8.3 | 8.3 | 84.7 |
| SD | 31 | 8.1 | 8.1 | 92.7 |
| Total | 28 | 7.3 | 7.3 | 100.0 |
| | 385 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 5: Voter Respondents' Response on Level of Agreeableness

Results in Table 5 reveal that majority of voter respondents (over 75%) were in agreement that voter turnout is low in a particular region where a by election may be held with the region dominated by a particular political party. Concurring with these findings Ee1 observed:

-----voting in Kenya and formation of political parties is tribal. Even a party of like Jubilee which claims to be a national party is not national party but a union of tribal leaders which may disintegrate any time if the tribal leaders disagree with each leader moving away with his or her tribal followers. You will realize that election fate of a candidate is sealed at nomination stage. Once a person wins a nomination ticket of that dominant political party, then it as if election is over. Other election is just a formality. In such a region preliminary are a matter of life and death. When such nominations are over some voters are likely to see lining up to take part in election as 'a waste of time' for an outcome whose results are known, hence low voter turnout especially for by election.

This position was further affirmed by CRO who noted;

-----there is need for Electoral Commission to come in and strongly supervise even primaries of various political parties. The voting pattern in Kenya for all elections has tribal inclination. People have lost life due to poorly supervised primaries against competing interests where competing candidates unleash even violence using goons to ensure that they clench party tickets in such areas which in most cases appear as a sure bet.

Thomassen (2005) observes that Party identification has the function of ensuring people's enduring addition to a political party. Party identification is a 'long-term, affective, psychological identification with one's preferred political party). It has been recognised that the strength of partisanship is an important predictor of people's political attitudes and behaviour as Partisan ties help orient the individual through the complexities of politics and mobilise individuals to participate in parties, elections, and the processes of representative government. This may be a pointer as to why there is likely to be higher voter turnout in preliminaries (nomination) as opposed to actual election.

2.4. Level of Rivalry among Political Parties Contribute to Voter Abstention in By-Election

Lastly the study endeavoured to find out from voter respondents their understanding on whether party rivalry has an influence on the rate of voter participation in an election. Voter respondents' response is shown in Table6

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| SA | 137 | 35.6 | 36.3 | 36.3 |
| A | 177 | 46.0 | 46.9 | 83.3 |
| D | 34 | 8.8 | 9.0 | 92.3 |
| SD | 17 | 4.4 | 4.5 | 96.8 |
| Total | 12 | 3.1 | 3.2 | 100.0 |
| | 377 | 97.9 | 100.0 | |

Table 6: Voter Respondents' Response on Whether Intense Party Rivalry Increases Turnout

As shown in Table 6, over 80 percent of voter respondents were in agreement that where there are intensive competing interests of different political parties, voter turnout is likely to be higher. Indeed, this is likely to be true as competing interests may imply that each party has to be more aggressive in selling its agenda and in mobilization of her followers to turn up and vote, hence the higher voter turnout.

Does it therefore mean that there is high voter rivalry in general election than by-election? This is what this study further sort to establish. Data representing voter respondents' response is reflected in Table 7

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| SA | 16 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 4.2 |
| A | 334 | 86.8 | 86.8 | 90.9 |
| D | 10 | 2.6 | 2.6 | 93.5 |
| SD | 14 | 3.6 | 3.6 | 97.1 |
| Total | 11 | 2.9 | 2.9 | 100.0 |
| | 385 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 7: Voters Level of Agreeableness on More Intense Party Rivalry in General Election Compared to By-Election

Results in Table 7 reveal that over 90 percent of voters were in agreement that there is more intense party rivalry among political parties during general election compared to by-election. This variation is likely to be a pointer to differential rates in voter turnout in the two elections within the same locality.

As if to affirm this position; Ee 2 states:

---turnout during general election is enhanced by several forces such as competing presidential candidates, Governors, Senators among others. When such election is over and by election is called, it is normally in one type of election say for position of Member of Parliament. Depending on votes obtained by various candidates during general election, a number of initial candidates end up pulling out in competing in by-election some due feeling that they may not make on basis of indication from previous results or financial demands associated with the elections. When such people pull out of election, some of their followers may turn out to cast their votes since they may have simply turned up initially to vote due to proximity to the person who may have pulled out. Take for instance the presidential run off after nullification of 2017 presidential election in Kenya. Did followers of Raila Odinga turnout to cast their votes?

Writing on voter participation and choice Cees van der Eijk et al. (2005) observe that party orientations of citizens are customarily found to be one of the most important factors that determine voters' participation and choice at the ballot box. The findings captured on influence of political factors in Table 1 to 3.7 were used to establish Correlation between political causes of voter turnout and participation in by-elections. The findings are reflected in Table 8.

| | Variable | X1 | X2 | X3 | X4 | X5 | X6 |
|----|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---------|
| X1 | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .317** | .918** | .387** | .633** | -.278** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 384 | 384 | 384 | 377 | 384 | 384 |
| X2 | Pearson Correlation | .317** | 1 | .438** | .320** | .278** | -.878** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 384 | 385 | 385 | 377 | 385 | 385 |
| X3 | Pearson Correlation | .918** | .438** | 1 | .258** | .768** | -.385** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 384 | 385 | 385 | 377 | 385 | 385 |
| X4 | Pearson Correlation | .387** | .320** | .258** | 1 | -.148** | -.281** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | | .004 | .000 |
| | N | 377 | 377 | 377 | 377 | 377 | 377 |
| X5 | Pearson Correlation | .633** | .278** | .768** | .148** | 1 | .293** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | .004 | | .000 |
| | N | 384 | 385 | 385 | 377 | 385 | 385 |
| X6 | Pearson Correlation | .278** | .878** | .385** | .281** | -.293** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | |
| | N | 384 | 385 | 385 | 377 | 385 | 385 |

Table 8: Correlation between Political Causes of Voting and Voter Turnout in By-Election

3. Legend

- During by elections, political parties do not mount aggressive campaigns compared with general elections leading to low turnout(X1)
- Aggressive campaigns by political parties during elections influences voter turnout(X2)
- In by election where a particular political party is dominant voter turnout may be low since most voters assume that the candidate to win election is already known(X3)
- In a by election where party rivalry is more intense, voter turnout will be high(X4)
- The level of party rivalry determines the rate of voter turnout(X5)
- Low turnout (X6)

Findings in Table 8 shows that there is inverse relationship between the selected political determinants of voter turnout and turnout in by elections. This implies that failure to mount aggressive campaign by political parties, dominance of a political party and low level of party rivalry have negative influence on voter turnout during by elections. It is further revealed that there is high positive correlation of 0.918 and 0.635 between failure by political parties to mount aggressive campaign during by election in a constituent dominated by a particular political party and low level of party rivalry respectively.

4. Conclusion

Political factors that reduce voter participation in by-election were; reduced Political competition, absence of presidential candidate and campaign by political parties more so in regions dominated by a particular party which negatively impacts on voter participation

5. Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it recommends for intensified promotion of Civic education by Electoral Commission and other relevant stakeholders so that the voters fully understand the need for participation in by-election just like general election.

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