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Electoral Participation in Cameroon: Variations in Voter Turnout

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Abstract:

Since the reintroduction of pluralism in Cameroon in the 1990s, electoral participation, the 'lifeblood of democracy', has been the subject of particular attention. This attention has made it possible to put in place a set of socio-political and institutional mechanisms to stimulate voter turnout. Thirty years later, voter turnout is being influenced by a range of factors. Among these factors are the salience of elections (municipal, legislative and presidential), socio-political, and security challenges. The combination of these factors may have contributed to place Cameroon in the category of low turnout countries, but there might be other reasons like the lower motivation. The aim of this paper is to understand variations in voter turnout observed within the electoral periods 1992-2020 in Cameroon and identify the factors that influence them.

Keywords: Cameroon, democracy, electoral participation, political culture

1. Introduction

Electoral participation became the cornerstone of the democratic process following the wind of liberalisation that blew across Cameroon in the late 1980s and early 90s (MENTHONG, 1998). Being an important element of a democratic system, participation turnout determines the performance of the entire system and facilitates its consolidation (KAMTO, 1999). Placing it at the centre of a democratic process, sociological approaches have laid emphasis on social determinism by underlining the convergence between social status and electoral participation, while the political approaches insist on the causal links between the political stakes, context and electoral participation (GWAIBI N. 2018). Mobilising these two approaches reveals many things that need to be analysed with regards to the variation observed in voter turnout since the first legislative and municipal twin pluralist elections in March and the presidential election of October 1992 in Cameroon. In the 1992 elections, turnout rate was 49.5% (March elections), and 71.9% (October elections). Thirty years later, a systematic decline in turnout has been observed with a participation rate of only 53% in the last 2018 presidential election and 43% for the 2020 municipal and legislative elections.

This situation requires a reflection as most of the literature that analyze the electoral behaviour in the context of Cameroon has somewhat neglected the importance of investigating motivational and contextual factors affecting turnout (EBOUSSI BOULAGA, 1997); NGNIMAN (1993); MOKAM (2012); SINDJOUN (1994, 1996, 1997). However, a link can be made between the salience of an election and voter turnout if we take into account, the different stakes involved in electoral contests. Mark FRANKLIN (1996:2) thus points out that, '*the elections that do not decide the deposition of executive power [legislative and municipal] can be expected to prove less importance (therefore less likely to motivate voter turnout) ...*' than a presidential election. Therefore, electoral motivation in Cameroon has been for a long time, concerned with the belief that individuals may have that their actions might influence the electoral outcome, thus engaging available resources including identity, to motivate votes (GWAIBI N. , 2016). But the emergence of several socio-political movements in recent times, has led to the downfall of electoral turnout, representing at the same time a credible threat to democracy in Cameroon. Beyond the literature that tried to explain this situation, and the community-based electoral mobilization in Cameroon, the decline in electoral participation also raises questions on the factors and reasons of electoral participation in Cameroon over time. How can we analyse electoral participation in Cameroon and its link with the political contest within the 1992-2020 electoral periods? And what are the determinants of voter turnout? The answer to these questions requires us to analyse the variations in participation by taking into account, the socio-political and institutional dialectic between systemic inflection and social reproduction.

In so doing, the paper uses structural constructivism (BOURDIEU, 1998), and instrumental model of electoral politics (DOWNS, 1957). This theoretical approach helps us to understand the way in which voters participate in elections, and why they are interested. The methodology is socio-historical and modeling, and strictly exploratory. As such, two essential research techniques are used: secondary sources from existing data, and semi-directive observation. The result, based on the historical trajectories of electoral participation, lays the foundation to better understand the factors (institutions, partisan and socio-political) that influence variations of participation, in order to identify and describe the stakes and challenges of this phenomenon.

2. Fundamentals and Patterns of Electoral Framework in Cameroon

The voting turnout in Cameroon, from an observation of the 1992 twin legislative elections (March 1st), and the first competitive multiparty presidential election of October 11, benefits from the scheme of the legitimization of democratic regimes. Voting has since then been presented as an important ritual of the political process, as it has been mainly related to a mixed of institutional and normative as well as socio-political arrangements, guaranteed by different forms of actions varying in their political implications. The aim here is to identify electoral participation scene and framework in Cameroon (A), and to present the trends and variations of participation, measuring at the same time, its level (B).

2.1. An Assessment of Electoral Fundamentals in Cameroon

The electoral participation mode in Cameroon is guided by specific provisions to the election of the President of the Republic, Members of Parliament and Municipal Councilors and to Referendums. These provisions are defined by Law N° 2012/001 of 19 April 2012 relating to the Electoral Code . The mode of participation is by universal suffrage and by equal and secret ballot (Section 2 (1) of the Electoral Code). It is however, important to note that this combination results from a historic compromise made in 1992 when the first laws were drafted for the democratic era and replicated in the 2012 electoral code.

Also, in its most recent January 1996 Constitution, the State of Cameroon acknowledges that 'election by direct universal suffrage' is the means through which authorities responsible for the management of the State shall derive their powers (Article 2). It further gives voting right to all Cameroonians of 20 years and above and requests political parties and other electoral stakeholders to 'help the electorate in the making of voting decisions' (Article 3). By and large, the President is elected by the 'whole nation' (Article 5:2), and by the majority of votes cast through direct, equal and secret universal suffrage (Article 6) for a seven years term renewable and with elections to be held within not less than 20 days and not more than 50 days before the expiry of the term of the President; members of parliament are also elected by direct and secret universal suffrage for a five-year term (Article 15), however, of the 10 senators per region, seven are elected by indirect universal suffrage on a regional basis and three of them appointed by the President of the Republic. These constitutional provisions suggest that Cameroonians have panoply of avenues to engage in electoral participation.

The above electoral pacesetter notwithstanding, an important electoral innovation in Cameroon is the *computerization* of the electoral system and in particular the introduction of biometrics to the registration procedure, amongst others. ELECAM introduced a biometric registration of voters, as part of the response from demands from other political parties and the international community. The introduction of the biometric voter registration system (BVR) has boosted the electoral process by easing yearly and regular updates of voter's rolls. This new system, which comprises 10 regional biometric centres or hubs located in ELECAM's regional delegations and one national elections biometrics center located at the body's head office in Yaounde, also comprises some seven steps: 1) logging in to test various kit appliances (camera, finger print scanner, receipt printer), 2) check eligibility credentials of person to be registered, 3) take voters photograph and ensure acceptance by automatic quality check, 4) Scan and check quality of voter's six fingerprints and mention exceptions if applicable (in case of amputees), 5) Enter relevant biographic data for voter identification as required by law, 6) Enter other information as applicable – disability information, phone number, etc., and 7) Crosscheck information, then print and issue voter registration receipt. The BVR system is definitely meant to capture every detail of the potential voter and avoid instances of duplicated identities which often led to multiple voting. This system is one way of ensuring that voter's rolls are reliable. For the 2013 legislative and municipal elections for example, voter registration using biometric means captured some 5.5 million voters, as compared to the estimated 7.5 million voters registered for the 2011 presidential election (CAMEROON, 2017:13). Inclusive voting also requires the development of an electoral system that allows all citizens of voting age to effectively participate in the electoral process and that is what the BVR system is trying to do. However, in spite of the impressive efficiency that the BVR system may be producing, ELECAM still faces some challenges with implementation such as ensuring the maintenance of the various components of the biometric system, on the one hand, and collecting the relevant information needed for the updating of the rolls, on the other hand.

Though most citizens support election as an important political function (BLECK, Jaimie and VAN DE WALLE, Nicolas, 2013), not all of them think of the relationship between voting and democratization in the same way. This makes the electoral scene in Cameroon to be a pluralist and polarised system of diverse set of political opinions that favour the rejection of the traditional 'autocratic' power distribution (WENZELL LETSA, 2019), including different actors. This period, known as the period of democratization, is to be correlated with a well-known electoral geography (MENTHONG, 1998).

It is however, possible to identify three main electoral tendencies in Cameroon: *pessimistic or symbolic protests* (those who do not believe in the electoral system, and represent 70%), *optimistic or democrats* (think voting can improve their level of democracy and change the regime) and *nonaligned or patriots* (think that voting is a given duty and irrespective of their political opinion, are proud to cast their ballot), depending on the voting preference of either the ruling party or the opposition.¹

In the Cameroon democracy, electoral frustration and apathy is a long-standing phenomenon. Across time, many people have withdrawn from a political system that they feel cannot change through elections. These cultures emerged from the way in which the relationship between politics and society is organized. Voting, which is recognized as an important instrument for democracy may appear to be a mere opinion if the majority of citizens do not participate (TALA

¹Survey done by WENZELL LETSA (2019): 70.4% say the RDPC would definitely win a majority; 7.4% said they probably would win a majority; 2.9% said it would be fifty/fifty; 2.4% said they probably wouldn't win a majority; 5.6% said they would definitely not win a majority of seats; 11.2% said they didn't know.

WAKEU, 2012). However, the fact remains that participation or non-participation is a right and, in some ways, reflects democracy in the same way as participation. This is what has been observed in Cameroon, with the fact that more citizens are abstaining. This electoral behaviour is the outcome of multiple and diverse citizen opinion about the political system.

Citizens who think the state as democratic are less likely to think that voting is important for its ability to democratize. Others may think of democratization as important, but may not see a link between voting and democracy. Such citizens see the act of voting as useless, and choose totally not to vote. However, voters who see voting as a way to improve democracy are more likely to participate in elections than those who do not see the relationship between democracy and voting.

2.2. Variations and Trends in Voting Turnout

The 1992 first multi-party elections took place in a context of strong political enthusiasm with the emergence of new and popular political parties. During the parliamentary election held in March of the same year, over 4 million people were registered to vote. A total of 2,044,318 people actually took part in the vote, in such a way that the turnout was 49.05%. During the presidential elections held in October, voters were deployed in the same proportions. Five years later that is in the May 1997 legislative elections, the number of registered voters fell to 3,844,330, while the number of actual voters stood at 2,906,156, representing 75.6%. In the parliamentary elections of June 30, 2002, 4,389,572 voters were registered and 2,882,164 people actually voted. These figures almost doubled in the 2011 presidential election where 7,521,651 were registered and 4,951,434 voted. Thus, between 1992 and 2013, the number of actual voters doubled. In 1992, though the population of Cameroon was estimated only at about 8 million, 4 million people were actually registered. Compared to the number of registered voters, it appears that 25.5% of this population took part in the electoral process. Applying the same principle of calculation to the 2020 population estimated at 25 million, this figure falls to 21%, with a total registered of 7 million, and 3 million actually voted. Behind the ever-increasing registration rates are decreasingly worrying participation rates (Figure 1).

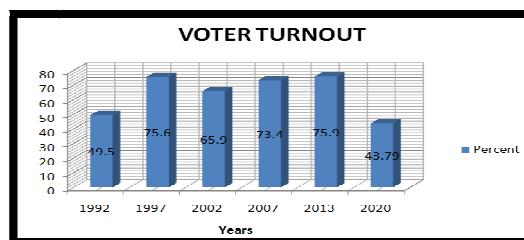


Figure 1: Turnout in Elections

Source: Author, 2020

The alarming decline on voter turnout in presidential elections (Figure2) is an indication that electoral process in Cameroon is considerably affected. Although the electoral population has doubled from about 4.2 million in 1990, to more than 7 million in 2020, the voter turnout has moved from 71.9%, to 43.79%. In the 2011 presidential election, there was already a decrease in the participation rate of about 68.3%, compared to that of 2004 representing 80%. Current events acknowledge a possible deflation of future turnout figures. While most focus on citizen participation was on the violence-hit Anglophone northwest and southwest regions, where voter turnout reached only 5 and 15% respectively, participation fell elsewhere too. In the northern part of the country, (a CPDM bastion) turnout declined from 68% in 2011 to less than 55% in 2018. The south region, another area of strong support for CPDM, also witnessed a slight decline moving from 84% in 2011 to 74% in 2018.

With the observation that electoral participation for presidential elections reveals a systematic decline in turnout, moving from 79.52% in 2004 to 53.9 in 2018, through to 68.28% in 2011 (ELECTION GUIDE). These observations indicate that the result for 2018 presidential election gave 55% in the French speaking regions and only about 5% in the Anglophone regions. This can however, be attributed to the on-going Anglophone crisis. The crisis that instituted a climate of fear among the people of these regions started in 2016 and since then, potential voters have not been able to exercise their voting right on election day for fear of being caught in the web of violence.

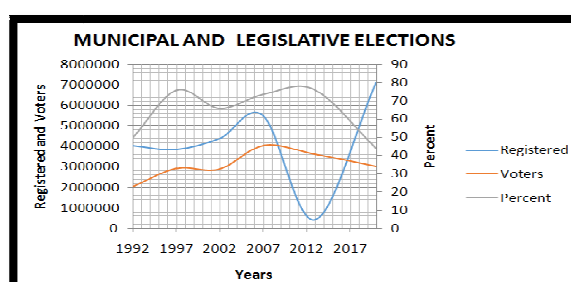


Figure 2: Turnout in Municipal and Parliamentary Elections

Source: Author, 2020

Does this situation indicate a systematic and systemic decline in electoral participation in Cameroon, when we observe that although the population is growing considerably, voter registration and turnout was significantly lower in the last 2018 and 2020 elections than in the past years? For example, the extreme north region had 1.43 million registered voters in 2011 (ELECAM, 2011), but only 1.13 million in 2018, a decline of more than 300,000 registered voters. Overall, national registration declined from about 7.5 million in 2011 to 6.67 million in 2018 (VERJEE & MUTAH, 2018). While this electoral participation decrease could be partly attributed to the complex socio-political context, problems with the electoral process have also been reported.

3. Factors of Electoral Participation: Between Institutions, Partisanship and Socio-Political Determinants

The literature on electoral participation and behaviour emphasise different factors that range from economic (LEWIS-BECK, M. S., & STEGMAIER, M. , 2000), institutional (DUBOIS, 2007), political (LEWIS-BECK, 2005), situational (DUBOIS, 2007) to social (AKHTER, Z., & SHEIKH, Y. A, 2014; SHIN, 2017), that influence people to vote or not. Some authors studied the community factors that influence the political participation in Cameroon (MENTHONG, 1998; MOUICHE, 2011), and the decline in participation observed over the last decade. Beside these factors, two other mutually inclusive determinants seem to be essential to influence electoral participation in Cameroon over the last decade: first, the institutional and partisan determinants; second, a complex socio-political and security environment.

3.1. Institutional and Partisan Determinants of Electoral Participation

There is an established positive link, according to Mark FRANKLIN (1996) between the welfare of a democracy and the level of electoral turnout. Attempts made at improving and facilitating electoral participation today is consistent with the realisation that increase participation in elections is expected to be a key driver of Cameroon's democratic growth (NGWANE, 2004; MOUICHE, 2011; LAWYER, 2017). The country's democratic process depends on the ability to guarantee and facilitate massive participation in the electoral process. The government has made significant strides in developing institutional and normative mechanisms especially in areas of attempts to provide a level playing field for political competition and electoral participation. Indeed, the need to achieve electoral participation that governs the democratisation process of the country depends on the multiparty system.

The harmonisation of procedures on voting processes assist in improving the participation prospects of Cameroonians, which is an important source of democracy. There is a need also to improve and codify obligatory election participation in such a manner that little room is left for boycott and abstention that tend to undermine political confidence in the electoral process. Also, there are no set measures for the registration of voters and the updating of existing voters' rolls. Each administrative official elaborates any procedure he/she believes convenient to be adopted within the area under his/her jurisdiction. These given procedures may lack consistency sometimes.

Party politics and culture While political culture has made it possible to understand, in Western countries, and through liberal democracy how institutions make sense in specific social spaces (GRENDSTAD, 1999), political culture in African countries like Cameroon has substantially involve the socialization of politics and therefore a regime of values, representations and actions in the name of politics. However, it should be pointed out that political culture, being a set of beliefs, norms, values and symbols, on the one hand, determines the vision and action of citizens, and serves as a frame of reference, on the other hand. Though multipartyism existed in Cameroon before independence, its reintroduction in the 1990s allowed political parties to bring people together from different socio-cultural, traditional and religious and also ethnic backgrounds in order to promote electoral participation. These parties therefore pressed and also sustained particular ideas or ideologies to impact on their political behaviour (LAWYER, 2017). Following Law no. 90/056 passed on 19 December 1990 authorising the creation of associations and Political parties in Cameroon, the country counts about 300 political parties that participate in municipal, legislative and presidential elections. The multiparty system however brought in some political attitudes: parties engaged in civil disobedience practices initiating strikes and inciting boycott of electoral processes like the Social Democratic Front (SDF) in the 1992 Parliamentary and 1997 Presidential elections, and the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC) in the twin 2020 Legislative and Municipal elections.

There is claim in irregularities of elections. ELECAM as a supposedly independent election management body needs reformation in its mode of appointment and mandate which should include, among other things, accreditation of election observers and results management and announcement of provisional results; adopting single, as opposed to multiple ballot system in order to minimize irregularities of elections may renew create confidence among Cameroonians and increase turnout.

Since its launching in 2006 and operationalization in 2009, ELECAM has also made some efforts to conduct voter education and training in order to reach out to eligible voters. ELECAM has set a communication strategy with the objective of changing the participation pattern and boost registration for elections. This means that, the aim is to cause the voters to participate in the political life and break away with elections apathy. These initiatives are, however, insufficient to effectively deliver voter education to the citizens due to a challenging socio-political environment. There is a need to improve the content and reach of voter information and sensitization, principally on the collection of voter's cards and ensuring transparency. There is a need to institutionalise a permanent consultative forum for sustainable engagement with political parties and other stakeholders in order to ensure inclusive participation throughout the electoral cycle.

3.2. Challenges of Electoral Participation in Cameroon: A Complex Socio-political Environment

According to different sources (opposition political parties, national and international observers' reports), operations concerning electoral participation in Cameroon since the return to multi-party politics in the 1990s have been marred by a complex socio-political environment relating to the legislative or normative, and institutional field.² This operation requires minimum commitments as it is considered to be one of the final phases of the electoral process (FRANKLIN, 2001) along with the counting and proclamation of results. Voting however, is closely defined and supervised by the electoral code. It determines the notion of 'elections' in its most restrictive sense, and whose rules and mechanisms face different challenges (KOMBI, 2015). While the voting procedure is subject to particularly detailed arrangements, the question of scrupulous compliance in practice with the general provisions remains of particular concern. This section identifies at least three socio-political factors that impact smooth electoral participation in Cameroon: the from Boko Haram's threat in the Far North; the Anglophone crisis in the North West and South West regions; and the generalised increasing voter lack of interest linked to the prevalence of the political status quo and the general perception that participating in elections is a waste of time, as voting would not result in any fundamental changes.

The increasing electoral apathy is as a result of past controversial political processes and increasing growing distrust among Cameroonian citizens. Since the return of multiparty system in Cameroon in the 1990s, all elections, according to opposition political parties and many national and international observers, have been marred by numerous electoral malpractices, among which fraud, multiple voting, stealing important documents during elections, undue intervention of governmental officials in the process, and political corruption. Many Cameroonians claim electoral fraud is partly responsible for the increasing voting apathy. According to the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2012 practical manual on combating electoral irregularities in Cameroon, results should reflect the will of the people (voters), i.e. fair, free and transparent elections. This is another way of saying that results have not been reflecting the will of voters as figures were manipulated to favour a party against the other. For this malpractice to end, efforts have to be multiplied against electoral fraud (MANUEL PRATIQUE, 2012). This fight must be a matter for all the actors in national life (citizens, political parties, civil society organizations, the body in charge of organizing the election, the administration) and must be done at all stages of the electoral process, that is to say before the elections, during the elections and after the elections.

The security context is also an important factor that has impacted electoral participation over the last decade in Cameroon. According to the UN figures, about 437,000 people are internally displaced and over three (3) million are affected (CHRDA, 2018), representing almost the entire population that voted in the 2018 presidential elections. During its visit to the Anglophone regions, the Electoral Needs Assessment Commission noticed increase animosity between various political stakeholders and ELECAM members (CAMEROON, 2017). The fact that the ELECAM became the target of violence greatly impacted the electoral process and in turn, the rate of participation. The recurrent Boko-haram activities including suicide attacks in the Far North since the beginning of 2014 represents a serious threat to peace, security and the conduct of elections. In 2018 and 2020 elections, Boko-haram threat seriously impacted on the conduct of elections, since it rendered difficult any efforts not only to carry electoral materials, but also movement to polling stations (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Another important factor of electoral participation turnout is the voting age. According to recent figures, 62% of the entire population of Cameroon is under 25 years and the current median age is 18.4 years (INDEX MUNDI, 2019). Many of these young people feel disconnected from the political process. This is facilitated by the lack of information, poor relationships between the old and young, and by legal standards that disadvantage the young. In particular, the electoral law sets the voting age at 20 years old, and this exacerbates the problem of increase voting apathy.

However, the challenges facing electoral participation in Cameroon are structured around the building of public confidence in the electoral process to the extent that final results are simply accepted (MENANG, 2006). This will put an end to the controversies that threaten the stability of the country's democratic system.

4. Conclusion

Voter turnout is an important indicator of the vitality of a democracy. It measures citizens' trust in not only the electoral process, but also in the political institutions. It shows how citizens participate in the governance of their country. This paper thus focuses on analysing turnout in Cameroon within the electoral cycle of 1992-2020. It postulates that the participation in Cameroon is generally average amongst cases of electoral competition, yet decreasing since 2011, with regards to the proportion of voters. It shows that participation in Cameroon over the last decade has been influenced by a number of factors that oscillate between socio-political (institutional and partisan) and security issues (Boko-haram and the Anglophone crisis). Based on the behavioral model theory of instrumental motivation, the study stresses the influence of partisan resources, attitudes (party and community membership) and institutional arrangements, as well as security context in explaining patterns of electoral participation. It thus considers the role of varying political contests, as sources of instrumental motivation and the factors that either stimulate or hinder participation. The debate here then emphasizes whether the level of political participation is globally changing in Cameroon. Observations of variations in participation indicate that turnout decreased since 2011, even though the rate of registration and other democratisation processes have increased. The work shows that in 1992, the number of voters was 2.906.156 out of 3.844330 registered, representing 71.9% of vote, thirty years later, it is 3.590.681 voters out of more than 7 million registered in the 2020 presidential

² The Electoral legal framework in Cameroon includes the 1972 Constitution, as modified in 1996, Law No. 2012/001 of 19 April 2012 (the Electoral Code), as amended in December 2012, and Law No. 2006/011 of 29 December 2006 (on the creation, organisation and functioning of ELECAM), as modified in 2008. The unified electoral code lays down provisions governing the election of the President, members of the National Assembly and the Senate, as well as municipal councillors, and referenda.

election, representing only 53.9%, through 68.3% in 2011. This however, might be an integral part of a more general recession in political affairs because party membership and the engagement in several types of political voluntary movements are declining.

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