



ESUT JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Vol.1 No.1. January, 2005

JOURNAL
VI (A)
AND
VII (B)

EJPS

Published By:

**The Department of Political Science
Enugu State University of Science and Technology,
Enugu.**

The Importance of Voter Registration in a Democracy

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Abstract

Any country today that is practicing democracy is said to be practicing a borrowed system of government. Initially, democracy, according to history, is a Greek system of government whereby the people of the ancient Greece came under one roof to exchange views, opinions or to deliberate on the public issues. With reference to the present system of government, this people (the ancient Greece) were made up the three organs of government, namely, the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. That means the laws of the society were made by them, they execute the laws and also interprets the laws collectively.

This paper on the importance of voter registration in a democracy is designed to examine why voter registration is one of the most important democratic institutions. Voters registration as one of the components of democracy has not been given the necessary priority mainly in most African countries today like Nigeria.

This Paper covers:

- (a) Introduction**
 - (b) Democracy from its true form to the representative government/modern government**
 - (c) Objectives of democracy**
 - (d) Importance of voters registration**
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- (e) Problems of democracy and voters registration and
- (f) Conclusion.

Introduction

In a democracy, voter registration is one of the few political sensitive areas that require adequate attention toward realizing a true democracy. So long as Africa is concerned and particularly Nigeria, voter registration has not made a fruitful impact on the democratic progress in the African countries, due to the fact that people concerned have not acknowledged its importance and have not given it priority.

According to Obasi (1981:1), "For the fact that the voter registration has been neglected for so long now, it had made it impossible for most of the democratic governments in Africa to succeed in their search for a conducive atmosphere for the governed". The negligence of this area of democracy has given rise to many vices-such as the mismanagement of the state economy, political backwardness, distrust among the people, tribalism and sometimes violence.

All these vices are encouraged whenever the voter registration exercise is neglected in every democratic society. This force people to lose their voting power, and are not qualified to exercise their voting rights in any elections. What then follows is that a small group of people in the society will manipulate the whole thing and vote into power candidates of their choice who might have influenced them with money during the campaign exercise. It happens that no candidate who spent his money to get into power would not like to recover those money spent, and also reward doubly those who voted him into power. In the long run, we find out that the poor masses who neither saw nor ate his money will be made the victims of the whole exercise.

Democracy: From Its True Form to the Representative Government or Modern Government

Democracy as we know originated from Greece but today has spread to various countries of the world. According to Macdonald (1972) "As this system of government moves from its origin to other places, some

features are remoulded or reshaped by the culture, economic, religion, social and political aspirations of inclinations of a particular country". Any country wishing to adopt it as its system of government must modify its features in the way that it will suit it. According to Dahl (1996) "It was as a result of this that we have what is called a modern democracy or representative government today in practices against the real or true democracy as was practice by the Ancient Greece".

Moreover, the geometrical growth of population can be accepted as one of the major issues that seriously affect democracy. Therefore, the modern democracy is practically different from the true democracy. Nnoli (1980) emphasized that modern democracy is based not on direct participation of the entire people of the society, but on representation. It presupposes not direct exercise of power but delegation of power.

Objectives of Democracy

For a true democracy to prevail in a country, certain objectives and conditions must be in place. These according to Obasi (1981) include:

(a) Rights of Citizens

The fundamental human rights of the citizens such as freedom of speech, movement, association, life, privacy, etc should be enjoyed by every citizen within the limitations of the law. People must be allowed to air their views on certain government policies and should also express their feelings towards any kind of situation. People must be allowed freedom of worship (religion). Decisions are also reached through unanimous agreement of the various representatives of various constituencies.

(b) Free and Fair Election

Election is the act of choosing or selecting candidates into offices usually by voting. Voting may be through secret ballot or any other method. In a democratic society election must be conducted in a free and fair atmosphere. The problems of electoral malpractice's (rigging,

voting more than once etc) should not arise. The particulars of the voter such as age, name, address or registration area should be checked so as to make sure that only eligible voters are allowed to vote.

(c) The Role of the Law

In a democracy, constitution which governs the activities of the government and the masses are known to exist. The government is bound to act within the limits of the law (constitution) and should not act outside the law. That is, the activities of the government in power must be constitutional. If there is any policy or decision made beyond the limits of the law, the governed has the right to criticize constructively the arm of government, which is directly involved (freedom of speech).

On the other hand, if a citizen offends the law, he should be tried by the judiciary and if found guilty, should be punished accordingly. In order not to victimize an innocent citizen. The judiciary must be impartial in discharging their duties.

(d) Voter Registration

This is the recording of facts about somebody who have the right to elect (vote for) a candidate or to be voted for during an election.

(e) Common people (Masses)

A state of society characterized by the recognition of equality of rights and privileges: political, social or legal equality.

The Importance of Voters Registration

Registration of voters is an important democratic principle, which forms the basis of a stable democratic government. It is aimed at equipping the government with an up-to-date information about the politically mature citizens in a society.

Registration also aimed at giving the citizen the right of franchise. According to Achibiri (1982), the citizen through registration "has the power to choose among the candidates, the one he would vote for"

The registration as an exercise also helps the electoral body to know which person qualifies to contest for an election. For a country practicing multi-party system like Nigeria in her 2nd Republic, political parties will present many candidates to contest for different offices in the government. The government through the services of the body handling the election affair determines through registration, the candidates who are qualified to hold political post.

According to Sultan (1982), the registration exercise also gives the individual the chance to discharge his or her civic responsibilities. Every body should take part in the activities of the government by performing his civic responsibility by registration. Civic responsibilities including things that a particular society permits its citizens to do. Through registration also the citizens of a particular place are known.

Furthermore, the registration of voters is considered more important than the actual election itself. It is during registration exercise that the groundwork for the election is made.

Through registration of voters, it is known whether truly the wishes of the majority will materialise, ascertained people would actually elect their rulers and whether such a choice would be respected or not. In all these however, credibility becomes a very important factor. This is to what extents are they free and fair? All are determine by the data obtained from registration exercise. Therefore it could be said that the information obtained from the registration of voters serves as a reference point to the result of the elections.

The importance of voter's registration cannot be over-emphasized. Very importantly, voter's registration enables a country to assess:

(a) Exercise of Rights of Franchise

This is the right to vote or be voted for in a democracy. A qualified citizen of the country is fully allowed to exercise or participate in the voting exercise or can be voted for, only if his or her name is found or

included in the register of electors. That is a list of persons qualified to vote. With this, it then means that whoever fails to get his or her name registered during the registration exercise has definitely lost the right entitled to him as a full citizens of the country. On the other hand, a person who is coming out for any election must make sure that his name is boldly written down in the voters list to avoid any embarrassment, or even disfranchisement during election. Therefore registration of voters in a democratic government can be said to enable the citizens to exercise their right of franchise to the fullest point.

(b) Determining the Number of Eligible Voters

For the sake of accuracy and efficiency, there is no other way the number of eligible voters in the society could be obtained except through voter's list.

The voter's register obtained by registering the voters contains all information covering both the electors and the candidates such information as; sex age, residence, and class are all contained in the voter's list. It is only through this that those who are not qualified to voter or disfranchised could be caught and disciplined accordingly. Through this exercise, it is easy to detect those who are mentally deranged and those that are serving various prison terms and those that are in the police custody and avoid them during the elections.

(c) Checking of Electoral Mal-Practice

The use of voter's list obtained through a voter registration exercise is the most effective way of checking electoral malpractice. The voter's list enables the electoral body that is conducting the elections to work out plans for the elections. With this list (registration data) they can ascertain the number of people to employ for the election, the cost and quantity of the voting materials required for the elections, when these plans are taken based on the voter's list, efficiency and accuracy are assured, since the wastage or the opportunity to the people to rig or falsify the result of the elections have been avoided.

Provided the voters list is available in every polling station, it is impossible for any person to vote twice, also it should not permit any party agent to bring in any voting materials that are not officially recognized.

(d) *Determining the Number of Taxable Adults*

The need for a voters Registration exercise cannot be over-emphasized; considering that it as a possible way of getting the accurate number of the adult citizens who are supposed to participate in the society. Based on its importance the government can easily channel the source of its income without many fictions. Since the citizen of every society make up the government of that particular society. There is no other way the government can get money apart from its natural resources to execute its responsibilities that is not from contributions made by its citizens according to their level of incomes.

Therefore, the voters registration, not only determines the number of taxable adults, but also helps the government to minimize the gap between the rich and the poor in the society.

Moreover, in this mass unemployment situation, government can only avoid the consequences of levying our youths (school leavers or graduates) who have no job, since we all know that an income-less persons are more or less dependants. And whenever such levy is mistakenly imposed on them, their reactions are very destructive.

(e) *Distribution of National Resources*

Besides, the very effective and promising way of distributing the national resources is through the statistical data obtained from a voters registration exercise. The government can only rely on it, since the frauds in the census exercise cannot yield any reliable result. Despite the fact that every Nigerian who is in any machinery of government is only there to satisfy his or her selfish wants, regardless of the confidences the masses reposed in him.

However, the remnants should be equitably or impartially shared among the citizens directly or indirectly. For this to be true the government has to reflect on the voters registration list.

For many at times some communities or local government do protest against tax collection since they are not enjoying any amenities from the government. For instance in 1986, the people of Awgu Local Government of Anambra State fought the tax collectors and destroyed their vehicles and other property, even lives were lost. Simple because they were neglected or not recognized by the government. They said that since the government cannot help them in any way in their rural development projects, there is no need paying any taxes, which they are not enjoying in any way. Instead they can use it to embark on the rural projects they have. Though under this circumstance, the government is to be blamed, but should not be blamed as such, since it is impossible for the government to execute well its responsibilities with imaginations.

(f) *National Development and National Development Planning*

The importance of registration for elections in a democracy can be viewed on the basis of national development and future planning. The exercise is more essential in the sense that the information that covers the national manpower's are obtained through it. With this, therefore, is easier for the government to articulate those manpower's to achieve its numerous objectives. Also the efforts of people in the society can easily be directed towards the achievement of common goals.

Moreover, accurate predictions on the future improvement of certain sectors such as education, politics, economy of the country etc can be made. It also discourages all the vices emanating from unscrupulous party leaders who wish to acquire power to exploit the masses.

According to Rimi (1982), the exercise does not only give the voters power to vote during the elections, but also to "pass judgment upon the ability, integrity and qualification of the several candidates for each office", especially in modern government or society where the functions of the government have grown very technical and special qualifications for these offices have become increasingly important.

Problems of Democracy and Voter Registration

The problem should be discussed on two basis, on the side of the electors, and on the side of the law enforcement agents and the electoral body itself. We know very well that for every elections to be considered a fair and free election depends on the behaviour of the candidates involved and the electors. With the power given to them by the constitution in every democratic society, there will be a peace in any elections.

The voters always abuse their voting rights. In Nigeria for instance, the right they have as citizens of Nigeria to create a comfortable future for themselves and their future generations is abused by taking bribe from politicians. That means selling their future well-being to the politicians who will later exploit them in recovering all that he or she spent during the elections.

Now, what have we to say about the tugs. The instrument of destruction, havoc, violence and victimization established by the fanatical politicians. These people are accused of supplying money, illicit gin and arms to the tugs and engineering them to harass and endanger the lives and properties of the masses that are not on their side. It is certain that this incessant armed robbery operations in Nigeria today could be traced to this issue of "tugs and the politicians.

The anomalies during the elections can also occur on the part of the law enforcement agents. It is believed that these law enforcement agents can be bribed by the politicians for unnecessary victimization of their opponents. Thereby doing the wishes of the few class or group of individuals, rather than doing the wishes of the government for which they were employed in the exercise.

Moreover, the various mistakes made by the electoral body in Nigeria during the previous elections should not be swept under the carpet. Such mistakes as inadequate provision of registration materials and voting materials even the electoral officers were not found at some polling stations. All these led to the ruin of the election.

Nwoko (1992) emphasized that "What are obtained from the previous elections are enough to tell every Nigerian that we are not practicing democracy in the actual sense. Then if we assume to be

practicing democracy, what does democracy suggest for the people? How are these limited in the previous exercises?" Reflecting again on the definition of democracy as the government by the people as contrast to the government by any interested section or class of the society not duly mandated or elected by the people. In analyzing the above definition a reasonable person could understand that the contrary was obtained on the last exercise. Since the people are not allowed by the tug and the politicians to exercise their franchise, instead their franchise was sold to them. In the long run people are no more determining the competent person among them who will represent them with their franchise, rather the tugs and the money determine form them.

Conclusion

The major role of voter registration exercise in a democracy cannot be over-emphasized. This exercise is a panacea in solving the problem of democracy in Nigeria. It is one of the institutions of democracy and therefore the efficiency and accuracy of this exercise could help a lot to avoid some of the democracy problems in Africa especially in Nigeria. For the registration exercise to be fruitful, we should stop looking at the past or the present rather to plan and prevent those things that will make us to miss a good future.

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