Voter Apathy, A Silence Killer of Our Democracy

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Abstract: Each vote serves as a strand that contributes to the tapestry of our democratic society. Yet, the challenge we confront today is the lack of interest or indifference among voters. In order to enhance the democratic system, a greater number of individuals need to step up to vote, and also inspire and spur others to participate. The active involvement in elections, especially from women and young people, is crucial for a thriving democracy. Voter apathy, also known as political apathy, refers to a situation wherein individuals who have the right to vote in political elections choose not to do so for a variety of reasons. The most common voter apathy definition is a sense that an individual's vote is meaningless or that there is no point in participating in an election. The watch word is that voter apathy is a silent killer of our democracy. In this paper, the author will attempt to identify what are the causes of voter apathy, why are young people very reluctant to engage in political participation and further make policy recommendation on how to achieve an all inclusive political ecosystem for all so as to advance democracy. The method the researcher will adopt will be desktop literature review and observation.

Keywords: Voter apathy, Democracy, Governance.

1. Introduction

The world is becoming more aware of the importance of credible elections in promoting democracy, democratization, and good governance. Elections are crucial in democracies as they ensure the representation of the people's will and help legitimize the political system. However, it is concerning to see a global trend of political apathy, lack of engagement in public affairs, emotional detachment from civic duties, and low participation in political activities[1]. It is for this reason the researcher decided to look into the issue of voter apathy and its challenge to democracy and good governance. Elections represent a cornerstone of democracy[2]. The involvement of individuals in this democratic procedure highlights the importance of representative governance beyond mere symbolism. Regrettably, both emerging and established democracies worldwide are currently facing the issue of voter apathy. In Africa, research and observations have indicated a decline in voter participation during recent national and local elections. Recognizing this reality, this study delves into the historical evolution of voter apathy, looking at its causes, its impact and challenges on electoral democracy in Africa. It should equally be mentioned that voter apathy manifest itself in various forms, some of which include; low voter turnout, a lack of engagement with political discourse and a general lack of interest in political affairs.

2. Historical Evolution Voter Apathy and its causes

Voting serves as a crucial element of civic engagement, enabling individuals to actively contribute to the functioning of a democratic society. The concept of political efficacy revolves around the notion that voting holds significance and has the power to bring about change. Conversely, voter apathy signifies a decrease in political efficacy, with a noticeable lack of interest prevailing in contemporary times[3]. This lack of interest is particularly evident among millennials, who exhibit a global decline in voting participation, largely due to their disengagement from politics as a whole.

Merely providing civic education may not suffice if the citizens do not witness tangible improvements in governance or service delivery[4]. Consequently, they may lose trust in the democratic system and fail to see the significance of their vote, especially when it does not lead to an enhancement in their quality of life.

In recent times, there has been a noticeable increase in voter apathy, leading to worryingly low levels of voter turnout in both emerging and consolidated democracies. Of particular concern is the declining participation of young voters, which has become a significant issue. The problem of low voter turnout cannot be attributed solely, or even primarily, to elections. Instead,

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[1] How voter apathy puts our democracy at risk | The Indian Express
[2] Bralton, M. " Formal Versus Informal Institutions in Africa". In L. Diamond and M. Plattner, eds. Democratization in Africa: Progress and Retreat, Second Edition (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010)

[3] https://www.kokstad.gov.za/index.php/en/front-page-news/voter-apathy-among-the-youth
[4] https://aceproject.org/electoral-advice/archive/questions/replies/78797089

it is often closely tied to the democratic, economic, and social development of a country. Therefore, the issue of low voter turnout must be examined within the broader context of building democratic societies[5]. Several factors contribute to the problem of voter apathy[6]. The absence of genuine democracy, the perception of individuals not being able to influence the political agenda, and a general lack of interest in political life all play a significant role in influencing electoral participation levels. Additionally, there are other factors related to the wider discussion on democracy that contribute to voter apathy and low turnout. The extent to which citizens engage and participate in the electoral process is a reflection of the strength of democracy. Voter turnout, or the proportion of eligible voters who participate in an election, is a key indicator of this. A high voter turnout typically signifies a robust democracy that is inclusive, while a low voter turnout may suggest a lack of trust or apathy among the public[7].

3. Impact of voter apathy on democracy and good governance

It is widely recognized that elections are a crucial aspect of a democratic state and process. The true value and essence of elections lie in the rights, freedoms, choices, and participation of the people in governance and the political process. Elections serve as a prominent indicator of participatory democracy, allowing individuals to express their liberty of choice. However, when voter apathy prevails, it goes against the norms and expectations of a democratic system. This apathy violates the civil liberties of eligible voters within the state. The failure of Elections Management Bodies to efficiently administer and organize the distribution and issuance of election materials further exacerbates this violation of civil liberties. Consequently, democracy fails to consolidate when widespread voter alienation and disenchantment arise due to the shortcomings of the election management body and the violence associated with the electoral process[8].

Moreover, the extensive disengagement of eligible citizens from elections has a detrimental impact on the credibility of the entire exercise. As a result, political parties and candidates who emerge victorious in an election characterized by widespread apathy do not enjoy the popular trust and mandate of the voting population. Consequently, democracy fails to consolidate when the elected managers or administrators of the state lack the overall mandate and confidence of the electorate.

In essence, when representatives or political parties are elected by only a fraction of the voting population to serve in government, they are more likely to pursue unpopular policies. This type of government may implement policies that do not reflect the concerns of citizens or prioritize the developmental needs of the state. Consequently, democracy once again fails to consolidate when voter apathy stimulates the adoption of unpopular policies within the government[9].

Moreover, indifference exacerbates the divide between the ruling class and the general population. As previously mentioned, it fosters a feeling of mistrust and skepticism between citizens and those in power. Consequently, this detrimental scenario hampers effective governance and gives rise to instances of social unrest, such as widespread protests against misguided policies and actions taken by the government[10]. Ultimately, this undermines the political stability of the nation. When the social contract between the people and the authorities fails due to voter disengagement, democracy itself fails to solidify its roots.

4. Challenges of Voter apathy on Democracy and good governance

Africa, as a polity striving for democratization, is currently facing numerous socio-political challenges that have hindered progress towards democratic consolidation and national development. One of the most significant issues is the crisis surrounding the election process. Presently, election crises pose a formidable obstacle to the continent's multi-party democracy. This crisis is evident in the malfunctioning of election management, logistical deficiencies, violence, and voter apathy[11].

When it comes to elections, voting, and voter apathy, it is important to recognize the crucial role that elections play in the process of democratization and democratic consolidation. Elections are widely acknowledged as the only legitimate means of transferring and exercising power in modern states. As a result, they have become the primary platform for political participation, allowing voters to exercise their democratic rights by electing representatives through periodic, free, and fair elections. Consequently, elections and voting are fundamental components of a democratic system[12].

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Voter disinterest is widespread in African elections, posing a significant obstacle to the advancement of electoral democracy. This issue is multifaceted and deeply rooted in various factors that have persisted throughout Africa's history, dynamics, and electoral processes. Consequently, it is evident that voter apathy continues to hinder progress towards democratic consolidation in Africa. Therefore, it is crucial to provide recommendations based on the findings of this research.

Essentially, voter apathy is a threat that can be addressed and reversed through effective measures such as,

> ➢ It is essential to promote a culture of accountability and responsiveness in governance. By fostering an environment of accountability in public sector services and responsiveness in governance towards challenges such as poverty, insecurity, and youth unemployment, the prevailing sense of voter distrust and disillusionment

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[5] https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf

[6] International IDEA, Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2002)

[7] https://www.hubdialer.com/glossary/what-is-voter-turnout/

[8] https://www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org/news/voter-apathy--especially-among-the-young--threatens-democracy-in-africa-1/

[9] https://dividedwefall.org/voter-turnout-impact-polarization/?fbclid=IwAR20g9K6YF8DLEuzcqi230cUHU-ryYKssdIl7ymTt41a7BAvmmvfhfNqm3M

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among millions of adult citizens towards state institutions and elections can gradually be reversed.

➤ Additionally, a transparent and efficient election management system is crucial to enhance citizens' trust and confidence in African elections. Ensuring decisiveness and transparency in the electoral process, free from the influence of opposition parties and ruling elites, will undoubtedly instill public trust and confidence in election management and the electoral process across the continent.

➤ Furthermore, decentralized structures and voter education processes will strengthen voters' confidence and enthusiasm to engage with the electoral process.

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