

Original Research Article

Politics of choice: Interrogating the place of ethical decision making in Kenyan politics

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Abstract: Over the decades, politics especially in mature democracies has involved making a choice between two or more competing individuals who take different and in most cases opposing positions on matters of importance to the electorate. After listening to political candidates, the voters get to the ballots to make a decision that will eventually affect them for entire electoral cycle. This paper seeks to investigate voting practices among Kenyan electorate and the exercise of ethical considerations when choosing their political leaders especially at the presidential level. The paper analyses voting patterns adopted since 2002 to 2017 general elections. The author is of the view that Kenyan voters are not guided by rational thinking but rather influenced by their cultural dimensions. The research seeks to answer one main question; what factors influence the voters' choice of a presidential candidate? Findings of this research will contribute knowledge on electoral matters enhancing public understanding of the purpose of elections. In addition, it will provide important information needed by the government and electoral agencies in formulation of voter education policies in a bid to help electorate make informed decisions as they seek to further democracy.

Keywords: Ethical decision making, ethnic communities, political coalitions

Introduction

Voting behavior among the electorate in Kenya has adopted a voting block system. In this system, members of a particular community or region vote for a candidate that the community led by politicians collectively agree to vote for. Kenya has a total of 43 ethnic communities and recent politics have adopted a pattern where a number of ethnic groups form a political coalition to consolidate their votes. This is done in a bid to harness their numerical strength to secure the presidential seat. In such an arrangement chances are high that sycophantic following take center stage as opposed to rational thinking. A general election is an emotive and morally charged period in any democratic country. As such, understanding how voters are influenced in making their decision is important.

This paper studies ethical behavior to identify factors and variables which influence voters during general elections. Using structured questionnaires the research seeks to ascertain factors considered by voters when making their choices at the ballot. 200 respondents were sampled. 180 questionnaires were returned although two were blank. 37% of the respondents are aged between 18 – 35 years of while 63% are aged 35 years and above. 27% and 10% of the

respondents did not take part in the 2002 and 2007 general elections respectively because they were not registered voters at the time.

This study bases its argument on Hofstede's (1984 as cited by Vitell, et al. 1993) theory of cultural typology. Hofstede argues that societies differ along four major cultural dimensions which include power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede defines power distance as the extent to which the less powerful individuals in a society accept inequality in power and considers it as normal. Although all cultures experience inequality each society is structured in a particular hierarchical order. However, the extent of the cultural hierarchy's acceptance varies from society to society. Individualist cultures according to Hofstede are those societies where individuals are primarily concerned with their own interests and those of their immediate members of the family. This is contrary to collectivist cultures which assume that individuals belong to "in-groups" such as extended family, ethnic group, or country from which they cannot detach themselves. The 'in-groups' are assumed to protect the interest of their members in return for members' permanent loyalty.

Masculinity, Hofstede argues, is the extent to which individuals in a society expect men to be assertive, ambitious, and competitive, to strive for materials success, and to respect whatever is big, strong and fast. In such a culture, women are expected to serve and care for the non-material quality of life, for children and for the weak. Feminist cultures in contrast have relatively overlapping social roles for both sexes with neither men nor women needing to be overly ambitious or competitive. In this light, masculine cultures value material success and assertiveness while feminine cultures value qualities such as interpersonal relationships and concern for the weak.

Hofstede (1984 as cited by Vitell, et al. 1993) explains uncertainty avoidance to mean the extent to which individuals within a culture are made nervous by situations that are unstructured, unclear or unpredictable, and the extent to which these individuals attempt to avoid such situations by adopting strict codes of behavior and a belief in absolute truth. Vitell, et al. (1993) aver that cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance are active, aggressive, emotional, security seeking and intolerant while cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance are contemplative, less aggressive, un-emotional, accepting of personal risks, and relatively tolerant.

This theory relate to ethics and ethical decision making in that the dimensions influence the individual's perception of ethical situations, norms for behavior, and ethical judgments. Because societies differ with regard to these dimensions, their ethical judgements will equally vary.

Ethical considerations in sound decisions making situations is as important as the decision itself (Geeta, Pooja, and Mishra, 2016). Any action that when freely performed by an individual has the potential of harming or bringing benefit to others is considered moral (Jones, 1991 as cited by Selart and Johansen, 2011). This is because the action has consequences for other people and involves choice for part of the decision maker.

According to Alvani and Jahromi (2016), the foundation of ethical decision making involves choice of balance. It is a guide to discard bad choices in favor of good ones. In a general election individuals use their moral base to determine between the opposing candidates. They interact with the situation in a bid to make right decisions. The final choice is a product of a rational process. In recent times, the topic of social responsibility in Kenyan elections have been of significant interest not only to scholars but politicians as well. The main question is whether the people's choice of their president during general elections is desire driven or euphoria driven.

Poupko (2016) carried out research on prevailing ideas and assumptions about the instrumental values of voting. He sought to study how and why individuals vote. He concluded that what one stands to gain from participating in democratic elections form a critical part of individual judgments that he makes on the ballot. The findings of this research can only hold true in a developed democracy where individuals look at what benefits them as individual and not collectively. Many voters in developing democracies are driven by euphoria created by political elites as they seek to whip emotions of their electorate and direct them towards voting in a particular way. Levin (2005) carried out a study on the influence of personal identity, personal ethics and personal benefits in the decision making processe and their importance to voters when making a selection for a leader. He concluded that personal benefits such as a prestiguos position greatly motivate a voter to change his or her vote. He adds that ethics are not a good predictor of ones voting behavior.

Oyugi (1997) carried out research to explain the nature of transaction between electoral politics and tribalism. He established that where power and wealth are at stake, ethnic relations become conflictual. He aver that elite mobilise ethnic passions to defend and or promote what is otherwise their narrow sectional interests. That the masses follow their leaders because of the lingering belief that only one of their own can best serve communal interests if placed in a position of power. Braton (2008) on the other hand carried out a study to seek whether ethnic identities inform the voting patterns of Kenyans as opposed to policy interests. His study reviews how Kenyans see themselves, and how they see others whom they fear will organize politically and deny them access to power. He concluded that people in Kenya vote defensively along ethnic blocks but not exclusively. He adds that actions of Kenyans in electoral choices show a country where voting patterns follow ethnic lines, and that there exists a high degree of mistrust of members of other ethnic groups.

The literature analyzed depict a Kenyan society where voting is predetermined by ones ethnic orientations. By analyzing the number of registered voters from their ethnic groups, a political candidate can easily predict the results of an election. This research differs from other studies by introducing an element of ethical consideration when making political choices. Data on such a research question is missing and this study seeks to fill this knowledge gap.

Data

This research utilizes questionnaire as the main data collection method. The questionnaire was made up of both closed and open ended questions. Closed questions were intended to enable quantification of

responses in order to ascertain the voting behavior pattern of respondents. Open ended questions were meant to give the respondents an opportunity to give more information regarding an issue in question. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods were used to interpret data and draw inferences.

Limitations to the study

This study heavily depends on the surname of the respondents to ascertain their ethnic groups as respondents were asked to voluntarily write their surname on the questionnaire. However there are cases where people have surname from an ethnic group which they don't belong. Some ethnic groups share surnames. In addition ethnic belonging does not ascertain one's voting pattern with certainty. However such cases are very minimal and their effect does not greatly impact on the outcome of the study.

Findings

In the 2002 general elections, 42% of the respondents who voted for Mwai Kibaki share his ethnic background while 64% of those who voted for his challenger Uhuru Kenyatta share his ethnic background as well. In 2007, the three main candidates were Mwai Kibaki, Raila Odinga and Kalonzo Musyoka. 65% of respondents who voted for Kibaki share his ethnic background, 47% of those who voted for Raila Odinga share his ethnic background while 83% of respondents who voted for Kalonzo Musyoka share his ethnic identity. 73% of respondents who voted for Uhuru Kenyatta and his running mate in the 2013 general elections share their ethnic origin. On the other hand 79% of the respondents who voted for his closest challenger Raila Odinga and his running mate together with the third principle Moses Wetang'ula share their ethnic origin. A similar pattern is witnessed in the 2017 general elections where 83% of the respondents who voted for Uhuru Kenya share ethnic origin with him and his running mate William Ruto while 77% of those who voted for Raila Odinga share his ethnic background together with Kalonzo Musyoka, and other coalition partners Musalia Mudavadi, Moses Wetang'ula and Isaac Ruto.

Factors that influenced voting

15% of those interviewed stated that they voted for their preferred candidate in the 2002 general elections because they belonged to their ethnic groups, 45% voted for their preferred candidate because they had better economic policies and proven leadership skills while 40% voted for their candidate for regime change. In the 2007 general elections, 4% of the respondents voted for their respective candidate because of a good manifesto that could foster economic growth, 4% voted for their candidate because they were good looking. 36% of those interviewed claimed to have been influenced by good performance of their candidate

while 56% voted for their respective candidate because they belonged to their respective ethnic groups.

In the 2013 general elections, 3% of the respondents interviewed voted for their respective candidates because of their performance record, 8% voted for their candidates because of the ICC indictment, 14% based their decision on the age of their preferred candidates 16% of the respondents voted for their respective candidates because of their manifesto, while 59% considered the tribe of their respective candidate. A similar pattern occurs in the 2017 general elections where two factors were considered by respondents in the choice of their preferred candidates. 38% of the respondents considered performance of their preferred candidate while 62% voted for a candidate from their ethnic community or a candidate in the same coalition with a politician from their ethnic group.

Discussion

The 2002 general elections saw ethnicity play a peripheral role in the choice of a presidential candidate. This is attributed to the fact that the then President had declared his retirement from politics and had nominated a candidate who shared ethnic background with the then opposition leader. The fact that the incumbent was not vying provided a window for electorate to consider other factors such as economic policies and regime change when making their choices. In this case, rational thinking, proper political analysis as well as ethical considerations came into play.

The 2007 general elections took a different turn. Ethnic background and better economic policies as well as performance records were the major factors considered by voters. Unlike the previous elections, ethnicity took center stage as majority of respondents admitted to voting for their preferred candidates because of their ethnic groups. The percentage of those who considered ethnic group of their preferred candidate rose by 41%. The 2013 general elections saw an increase in ethnic considerations in political choice by 44%. The trend continued in the 2017 general elections as 62% of respondents admitted to voting for their preferred candidates because they belonged to their ethnic groups or they had a member of their ethnic group as a coalition partner in the political coalition.

The period stretching from 2007 through to the 2017 general election saw an increase in ethnic group consideration as the domineering factor in the choice of a candidate. Raila Odinga formed Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) which comprised of Musalia Mudavadi, William Ruto, Najib Balala and Joe Nyaga as the principles, both from different ethnic communities. The five individuals whipped members of their ethnic communities into voting for the ODM candidate with the promise of jobs and lucrative

government tenders. The 2013 general elections saw a similar scenario where Raila Odinga formed Coalition for Restoration of Democracy (CORD), a political coalition which comprised of himself, Kalonzo Musyoka and Moses Wetang'ula both from different ethnic groups. Uhuru Kenyatta on the other hand joined ranks with William Ruto to form Jubilee coalition while Musalia Mudavadi joined hands with Eugene Wamalwa to form Amani coalition. Members of the three coalitions mobilized their ethnic groups to vote for their respective candidates. In return they would receive development in their areas, jobs and protected business interests. The case was the same in the 2017 general elections although CORD was expanded due to entry of Musalia Mudavadi who abandoned Amani coalition, Isaac Rutto who abandoned Jubilee coalition, and was renamed National Super Alliance (NASA) while parties that formed jubilee coalition merged to become Jubilee party. Both political coalitions mobilized voters from their ethnic communities to vote for candidates fronted by their respective coalitions.

Conclusion

CORD and Jubilee coalitions which transformed into NASA and Jubilee party were used by politicians as vehicles to whip voters from their respective ethnic communities to vote for candidates fronted by them without rationally considering what the politicians promised to accomplish or what the electorate expected from them. Many voters did not interrogate manifestos fronted by candidates because of euphoria. Promised government jobs, lucrative government tenders and protected business interests, which in most cases never materialize, are baits which such politicians use to convince voters. In addition, whipping of emotions and propaganda against opponents, which instill fear, hate, euphoria among voters lead them into making emotional decisions.

Patterns witnessed in the research portray a worrying trend where voters are not given a chance to consider what is best for them. Instead politicians assume the role of advisors whose endeavor is to give direction to electorate rather than providing a platform for exchange of ideas, interrogation of policies and discernment of the best from the rest. This trend clearly shows that voting is not preceded by ethical considerations. Kenyan voters are greatly influenced by Hofstede's dimensions. Ethnic identity of the candidate has emerged to become a dominant factor considered in the choice of a presidential candidate.

Voting is a political choice that involves consequences which a voter is expected to live with for an entire electoral cycle. The voter is therefore required

to make rational decisions after weighing all options on the scale of what they expect against what politicians have to offer as opposed to consideration of ethnic origin of a particular candidate. Rational thinking in societies that embrace collections such as Kenya is minimal as group interests are given priority over individual interests. Collections dictate voting patterns thus decisions made are not based on reasoned actions but rather community interests. In such a scenario, ethical decision making process is unlikely to occur.

From this analysis, it is clear that most people who participate in Kenya's general elections are influenced by their cultural orientation which is riddled with stereotype, pride and prejudice. Choices made at the ballot are not decisions made ethically but rather positions taken collectively in the best interest of particular communities. Such collective decisions cannot be ethical. There is need for freedom of choice to take center stage as this will allow ethical decision making processes. An infusion of liberal learning should be incorporated in the school's curriculum as this will prompt students to act professionally and make ethical decision.

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