

Original Research Article

Sociological Determinants of Voting in the Local Public Space in Cameroon

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Abstract: Electoral sociology, the subject of this study, appears to be a privileged framework for the exercise and understanding of theories of voting, and knowledge of the sociological determinant of voting, a line of thought created to understand electoral behaviour in Cameroon. In order to understand the related logics, a qualitative study was conducted based on a review of the political science literature on explanatory models of voting. Results of this study showed that electoral behaviour at the local level is no longer fixed and is not necessarily a function of political parties. Voters are more informed, more realistic and less predictable. This situation is sustained by the political context, as voters seem to be more aware of issues at stake because they are more directly concerned than in the past and feel solely responsible for their future and their fate with the disengagement of the State in most sectors of the Cameroon economy through decentralisation.

Keywords: Voting Determinants- voting - voter - voting behaviour.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of African societies and democracy questions first and foremost power and the exercise of power with its rules and logic, the mode of organisation of societies through representativeness, materialised by the vote. To this end, one of the main concerns of political science is to understand the voting behaviour of voters and its determinants. Indeed, despite importance of research on voting behaviour in these systems, results of the studies are sometimes ambiguous or even contradictory. On the one hand, there are traditional determinants that are long-term factors influencing behaviour, such as socio-demographic and economic factors of voters, and on the other hand there are medium to short-term, rather rational factors, such as policies advocated by parties. Increasingly, political science studies examining voting behaviour in democracies are moving towards a consideration of less rational and more affective factors, and are now emphasising the importance of those related to the reputation of the party or the personality of the politician and his or her leadership style, over and above factors related to issues and political programmes (McCallister, 2005).

From results of the various legislative and municipal elections, it appears that in Cameroon, although there is electoral stability, characterised by the

apparent domination of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), it is marked by a certain volatility. And in most cases, data do not always explain choices of various voters during successive votes. Attempting to understand the overall issue of sociological determinants of voting helps us to know how voters attribute the vote and orient their electoral choice. Is the decision to vote a consequence of socio-cultural characteristics, built around a set of values and principles or a rational individual act? Is voting a collective or individual act? What are the various factors that influence it? How can the volatility of voting behaviour be justified? This study will therefore take into account all these dynamics to better understand the reality in Cameroon at the local level in the context of municipal elections.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis of sociological determinants of voting leads to an understanding of voting as a social fact. In an attempt to understand it, we will review various paradigms that guide and structure this social logic. There are a variety of factors shared within communities that explain voting behaviour.

The first paradigm is built around the "sociological model". This is closely linked to the work of Paul Lazarsfeld, who emphasises social realities and

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social logic as determinants of voting. This so-called deterministic theory highlights the idea that electoral choices are known in advance (Duverger, 1966). These are fixed and do not undergo modifications throughout the electoral process, because variables known as voting structures guide and structure thoughts of voters and ultimately codify their behaviour. Thus, elements of socialisation such as family, professional, social and cultural backgrounds exert their own additional influence on voters' choices, which are now static. This is why, in the case of his study at Columbia University, Paul Lazarsfeld highlights a certain number of so-called deterministic or sociological elements that shape voter behaviour. These include social status, religion and place of residence as fundamental elements that guide the vote of various political actors.

Thus, seen from this angle, the deterministic model takes into account the environment and considers it as a determining factor in the political choice, all the more so as it acts on the voter. This perception of political reality is aptly translated into the idea that "a person thinks politically as he or she is socially". Social characteristics determine political characteristics. Following this logic, it is undeniable that sociological variables such as social class, age and gender are deterministic and codify voter behaviour.

The second paradigm is the so-called "political psychology" paradigm, better known as the "Michigan model", which emphasises partisan identification as a key element of voter choice. In order to understand this paradigm, one must subscribe to the logic that voting - according to followers of this theory - is an eminently political act. The idea of the vote as an eminently political act underlying the realisation, materialisation and action of the voter is first inscribed in the voter's thinking. The voter looks first of all at the politician (Glass, 1985): what he embodies his managerial capacities, his personality, his leadership style, his charisma, his image and his qualities (Garzia, 2013). Thus, the voter takes into account the party for or against which he or she is voting, because according to the voter, the political party is the determining factor in his or her choice and electoral orientation. In this sense, he considers the party and the values it embodies when making his electoral choice (Garzia, 2012).

Furthermore, the voter also takes into account the political programmes embodied by the candidate. In this sense, the voter does not simply vote for the candidate, nor for the party, but takes into consideration the political programmes carried, supported and defended by the candidate and embodied by the party (Mayer, 1992). The analysis of this paradigm supposes that it is similar to the so-called deterministic model given that voters in the majority of cases are immobile in their initial choices and one can thus note little electoral mobility and thus little electoral volatility.

If in the "psycho-political" model, the voter is fixed in the majority of cases, and considers the psychological forces which guide and structure his choices, the model of the rational voter, like any economic agent, is a rational actor on the political scene. In this sense, the electoral decision is taken according to the political offer. The situational variables of the vote lead the voter to make a considered choice, to make a political act based on the judgement he or she makes of various actors in the political arena. In this sense, they consider a certain number of factors which systematically guide them in their choices (Vedel, 1962). For him, the ideological question is of little importance in his electoral choice. But systematically, he addresses electoral stakes. He takes into account the key elements that can guide and structure the action or the act he is going to take (Garzia, 2013). As a rational political actor, the voter takes into consideration candidates and analysis he has made of them, according to their past, present and future. He considers promises made in the past and achievements made by various candidates. It considers the politician's social, religious and cultural background. There is thus a "vote on issue" (Karvonen, 2010).

By assuming that the voter is rational, it appears that he is no longer captive to social determinants. He breaks free from the latter's yoke. He will systematically seek to maximise his utility like any economic agent. By basing himself on logical reasoning, he will build up certain autonomy around him and within himself which will give him the capacity to decide on the basis of rational reasoning and a freedom obtained through the various elements he has been able to gather about the outgoing candidate. This will enable him to vote for or against the outgoing candidate.

III. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The question relating to the analysis of sociological determinants of the vote in the Cameroon local public space remains fundamental and determining given that Cameroon, through Law No 2019/024 of 24 December 2019 on the General Code of Local Authorities, is in line with the logic of an effective local governance, although it has a local electoral culture in place since 1950.

Thus, we will focus on municipal elections and not on presidential and legislative elections, because in most cases studies have been conducted at the national level. There are very few studies conducted at local level. However, we believe that the context in which Cameroonian society is evolving is strongly influenced by the phenomenon of decentralisation, in which populations are increasingly called upon to be masters of their own destiny, by designing and implementing development policies capable of improving the living conditions of their populations in the long term through

participation in the management of public affairs, which takes the form of voting. Questioning the determinants of voting at the local level within the framework of electoral sociology therefore makes it possible to understand individual behaviour during electoral decision-making, particularly during the municipal elections in the city of Ngaoundere.

This is why the research paradigm chosen is constructivism. This allows the researcher to understand reality as a construction, based on social experiences. For the form and content of reality always depend on the construction made by organisational actors through their interactions, in particular contexts.

Following the constructivist research posture, a qualitative approach was adopted and a semi-structured interview guide was developed in order to cover all the central elements of this research without falling into stereotypes or predefined categories. It is based on the purpose-built model for analysing the determinants of voting, which takes into account the politician's social life, his managerial skills and the political party to which he belongs.

The social life of the politician includes his social status, religion, age and gender. The politician's managerial skills relate to the fulfilment of past promises by the politician, his personality, image and qualities. The political party highlights the name of the political party, values it embodies and its political programme. In administering semi-structured interviews, particular emphasis was placed on their flexibility in order to maintain the authenticity and uniqueness of each interview and of each interviewee in his or her rendering of the dynamics and logic of voting in Cameroon.

IV. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Classical studies of electoral participation have often analysed electoral behaviour as a behaviour determined by heavy variables: age, religious affiliation, socio-professional affiliation. Results of this study have highlighted a number of sociological variables: religion, social class, age and gender. But it is relatively difficult to isolate one variable, as some of them intersect.

Identification with a social group, a social category or a political organisation is effective among respondents and may determine some of their social behaviour. Indeed, regular participants in elections affirm their identification with a political party. In this case, the voter, when putting his or her ballot paper in the ballot box, behaves above all as a member of a political or social group. Thus, most of respondents who vote regularly identify with their political party at the time of political discussions and voting. The strongest political link between the voter and the party and thus the candidate presented by that party is thus involved.

By identifying with the party, the voter does not care about the programme proposed by the party, nor about the personal qualities of the candidate. It is the political and ideological link that is predominant here. The political activist votes for the candidate because of his or her label and not because of his or her real personality, even if sometimes we note a few "sanction votes" as an expression of disagreement and as a political sanction to the party.

The few voters who are active in a political party very often and more regularly vote for their party and less for the candidate. The other form of determination to which voters are subject is that linked to a form of social and religious solidarity. In this case, and with regard to the candidate, an expectation of political or non-political goods is expressed that only he or she is supposed to be able to satisfy. It is this form of determination that some have called "political clientism".

As Chevallier (2007) points out, "between power-hungry political elite, populations anxious to reduce their dependence, and a proletarianised demand base, there is apparently little common ground: the universes tend to become watertight, almost impervious to each other. Dialogue is becoming difficult between populations that ignore each other, while constantly rubbing shoulders, and whose values, aspirations and reactions are radically different".

Day by day, there are latent tensions and open conflicts between the political elite that have a negative impact on voting. This situation sometimes becomes so difficult and untenable that it leads to casualness and disinterest. However, in this system, in this jungle, in this arena, the people are in most cases able to make the most of the room for manoeuvre they have. This arena is a place where different groups, forming networks and factions, confront each other in order to make their personal material or symbolic interests prevail.

Politics thus becomes a space where actors with totally divergent points of view rub shoulders. The grassroots, unable to initiate, propose and make its argument prevail, is content to make its basic needs its priority.

This attitude is certainly notorious among voters who are ready to "sell" their votes in exchange for a job or a pittance. This phenomenon is real, but superficial or effective. In fact, granting a good and a service is verifiable but it remains in the "secret of the gods" if the "partner" has respected the pact and sent the counterpart. For it is almost impossible to prove whether the voter at the time of voting actually voted for the one who "paid" him.

In fact, voters admits that they have very often received "something" from political authorities but that

they have often refused to carry out such acts by voting for another candidate or by putting a void ballot paper in the ballot box: they would thus be playing the game without playing “fair”. It is true that there may have been an intention to corrupt or an attempt to “buy votes”, but it is still difficult to prove.

The political clientism of voters would only be a springboard for them, a means of acquiring financial means, as one of our respondents said: “It’s our parents’ money (...) let them give us our share. Once in the polling booth I know what I am doing because there is no other witness except God. This clientism of voters to “enrich themselves” or to “profit” from the campaign and the elections is only a strategy to fight against the poverty and unemployment in which they find themselves. The electoral campaign and elections are therefore privileged moments for them to “blow off steam”. Moreover, it should be pointed out that this clientism is not the work of a few voters, as many heads of families exchange their votes and sometimes those of their offspring for bags of rice, cans of sardines or other existent material or financial means.

This phenomenon of clientism is only one facet of the generalised corruption that has spread to all segments of Cameroon society, which is favoured by poverty, precariousness and unemployment. However, the electoral behaviour of voters, especially the electoral choice that follows, is far from being totally determined.

Moreover, it should be noted that voters are generally “independent” and “neutral” with respect to political organisations. Thus, a large proportion of them distance themselves from the yoke of political parties and are less concerned with social and religious solidarities. The vast majority of voters make their choices (as well as their participation) according to the candidate and his or her personal qualities. For most of them, it is therefore identification with this personality which results in a positive vote in his favour. Voters choose their candidate because they “feel they can trust, confide in or even abandon themselves to him/her”. The candidate is then considered superior and the voter voluntarily places himself in a situation of psychological dependence on him. The voter is “pleased” to be in a relationship of obedience with the candidate. The qualities of the candidate (authority, competence, honesty and charisma) seduce the voter and are essentially personal factors.

The mention of primary loyalties is common among voters. “Objective” factors which guide the electoral choice of voters are thus either the program proposed by a candidate or a party, or recognised objective skills in a candidate, which skills found a confidence and an assurance between the voter and the candidate. The electoral choice in this perspective follows a personal logic. The voter makes his or her

choice according to the candidate’s presumed ability and competence to solve social problems such as unemployment and poverty. It is neither ideology nor “political” factors that guide their choice, but rather the proposal of viable and adequate solutions to the social and political situation.

It appears that this new voter is adopting new attitudes that are the result of greater political realism, which are in line with daily life problems, and who have realised that “fine speeches and promises are useless; we must act (...)”. They no longer want to allow themselves to be used for exclusively political and electoral ambitions. The time for realism has come for these voters.

V. CONCLUSION

At the end of this study, it should be noted that electoral behaviour at the local level has changed considerably. If at the beginning the logic built around variables such as family, professional, social and cultural backgrounds, as well as other variables such as age and gender, had a specific and additional influence on the electoral choices which have now become static, today these determinants have evolved and are oriented towards the rational voter. We are witnessing a decline in partisan voting and the rise of voting on issues or on the political offer (candidate, programme). At the local level, voters most often vote for the most “serious” candidate, the most “honest” and the most competent in their eyes and capable of bringing about changes they want. These new generations of voters are relatively free of partisan ties and social solidarities and are therefore more autonomous. Voters therefore have a fairly high degree of political conceptualisation and a very marked tendency to challenge the order and organisation of elections in Cameroon. Thus, we have two categories of voters: those who identify with or are active in a political party and those who claim to be “independent” of political parties.

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