

American Journal of  
Leadership and Governance  
(AJLG)

**LEADERSHIP**  
and  
**GOVERNANCE**

**WHY YOU MUST VOTE IN AN AFRICAN  
DEMOCRACY**

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## WHY YOU MUST VOTE IN AN AFRICAN DEMOCRACY

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to draw attention of election managers in Africa to the negative impact of voter apathy on poll outcomes. It encourages all eligible voters to cast their vote in democratic elections. The instances of contested elections, poor governance, election of ineffective leadership and civic violence could be avoided if the electorate came out in full to give voice to the will of the people.

**Methodology:** The researcher reviewed published literature discussing the performance of postcolonial democracy of independent nations across Africa. With specific reference to academic journals, electoral documents capturing voting patterns and historical records, the researcher uses descriptive statistics and thematic analyses of texts to highlight the effects voter apathy has on national leadership and governance.

**Findings:** Voter apathy compromises the expression of the will of the people and causes an erosion of citizen commitment to social responsibility. It also leads to the emergence of apathetic leadership and weak accountability of government institutions following general elections. The researcher suggests that voter apathy is one of the reasons for civil unrest, passage of unpalatable legislation and election of ineffective leaders.

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** The researcher calls for democratic governments and electoral bodies in Africa to note, examine and act to preempt the negative impact of voter apathy on election outcomes. Voters are called upon not to presume that a democratic election process will automatically guarantee effective governance outcomes without their participation. The paper also recommends that the process of voter empowerment should be formalized in electoral practice, policy and procedure.

**Keywords:** *Voter Apathy, Governance, Leadership, Democracy, Elections*

## INTRODUCTION

Post-colonial African countries came to independence in the context of the global cold war that saw African governments adopt either Western (democratic) or Eastern (communist) leaning ideals. There were also countries somewhere in between with states like Tanzania evolving its own *Ujamaa* system of socialist practices (Mukhungulu et al., 2017). Nonetheless, many of these new nations devolved into autocratic rule, dictatorships and military regimes a few decades later (Meredith, 2005). Leaders in these nations drew practices from the Big-Man and Trait theories (Northouse, 2016) that support autocratic and authoritarian rule. The reason for this may be put down to the nations inexperience in participatory governance having just come from a sustained period of colonial rule (Davidson, 1973). The colonial expansionist agenda scattered African rule, its kingdoms and empires with their systems of government (Walker, 2006). Colonial powers used divide and rule techniques, fanning tribal animosities to maintain control over geographical territories (Pakenham, 1991). Thus post-colonial nations were not made up of homogeneous tribes, races or kingdoms. The uniting philosophy was to get rid of colonialist in these locations and reclaim self-government. The “how” would be worked out later. Nonetheless, cultural differences, historic tribal loyalties and competition for resources, power and material wealth, was hardly an ideal environment in which to introduce democracy. The people had never participated in a political process that offered them a chance to direct the affairs of a nation (Lancaster, 1991). Neither did they have the education or exposure to participate in these modern forms of government. It would take generations for African nations to develop and embrace nationalistic ideals. The people needed basic empowerment and elevation of self-worth and dignity in order to participate effectively in the process of nation building through a unifying national process.

African democracy has therefore developed in quite a different context from Western democratic cultures that have evolved over generations from feudal European and Commonwealth contexts (Fukuyama, 2011). Nonetheless, Post-colonial African nations have steadily gravitated towards forms of democracy moving away from authoritarian governments and embracing democratic ideals (Bates, 2010). By 2012, African democracies had risen to 17 out of 50 countries indicating a growing desire for citizenry participation in national governance (Gylfason, 2013). The drivers that have led to this gradual shift to democracy may be that it has benefits over other forms of government. Nonetheless, generational empowerment, particularly through education, has led to citizens engaging and demanding greater accountability from their leaders and government (Lindberg, 2010). This has engendered the growth of civil society and the expression of citizen power to direct the affairs of the nation and participate in wealth creation. Five of the top ten richest nations in Africa are confirmed democracies (International Monetary Fund, 2022).

The principles of democracy assume that, 1) it is the best form of government, 2) the majority should rule based on the premise that every citizen has an opportunity to influence government policy and, 3) provides for the right of the minority to criticize majority decisions (Prothro & Grigg, 1960). These principles support the inclusive nature and importance of 100% participation of voters in a democratic process. “The UN supports democracy by promoting human rights, development, and peace and security” (United Nations, 2022). Of key concern to the United Nations is good governance, free and fair elections, the vibrancy of civil society and the accountability of national institutions and leadership. Effective democracy involves the observance of 1) Citizen involvement in decision making, 2) A system of representation, 3) The rule of law, 4) electoral system-majority rule, 5) Some degree of equality among citizens, 6) Some degree of liberty; or freedom granted to or retained by citizens, and 7) Education

(Katznelson, 2013). The application of these principles may not be mastered overnight, but they do require the participation of citizens in the democratic process to realize its socio-economic benefits. Hence non-participation in the democratic process disempowers sections of a society. Democracy gives citizens opportunity to participate in government, reduces exploitation, promotes equality and economic growth with decentralized power structures (O'Toole, 1993). "Democracy is ineffective unless voters educate themselves on governing decisions...that gridlock occurs frequently in democratic structures" (Miller, 2022). An effective democracy needs an enlightened citizenry that is tolerant of outcomes. Nonetheless, mobilizing democracy demands complex and costly processes such as holding general elections. In a democracy, the vote is an instrument of power. everyone in the nation has one vote. Voters cast their vote for a leader of their choice. The person who garners the most votes during an election assumes authority to rule and direct social policy and economic affairs. If everyone votes during an election, the outcome of that election reflects the general will of the people and how they would like to be governed. If a substantive number of people do not participate in an election, it becomes contestable as not reflecting the will of the people. Thus casting ones vote at the ballot box is essential for the democratic process to be both authentic and legitimate (Rotberg, 2014).

In summary therefore democracy affords peace through the expression of views and opinions on social issues, participation through collaboration and progress in terms of the guarantee of national advancement. It also provides a substantial measure of freedom for citizens and guarantees prosperity for a nation through representative distribution of resources (Lewis, 2008). However, this is a collective responsibility of citizenry that represents the will of the people. Thus to derive these maximum benefits it would be important that everyone votes on these issues to obtain a clear sense of the will of the people. Voter apathy sours this picture and gives an inaccurate assessment of the will of the people which means that national governance will not be fully representative of the will of the people.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

At the heart of politics is the right and power to control the destiny of a nation. In a democracy, that right and power is allocated to the people over the electoral season and transferred to the elected leaders for the interim period of four or more years (Katznelson, 2013). This means that the people hold the right of power very briefly and take the risk of entrusting the nations' future to a limited number of officials over an electoral term. This is a big personal and national risk. The poor performance of elected leaders across the African continent may be a cause for voter apathy, but not a substantive reason not to vote. Rather, it suggests a lack of knowledge of the power vested in a vote. The apathetic voter creates four governance problems, 1) the eligible voter who does not register compromises the representative quality of election outcomes (Africanews, 2022). 2) the uncast vote gives no direction to the will of the people, 3) the abstention vote; a vote not cast, compromises the representative nature of election outcomes, and 4) the careless vote; a vote cast without due consideration of the common good, misdirects the cause of the public interest. Careless votes also give latitude to the emergence of apathetic leadership by elected officials (Solijonov, 2016). At least four elements contribute to voter apathy. First, is a lack of appreciation of the importance of good governance in a society (Solomon & Solomon, 2004). Second, ignorance of the power of the vote in the democratic process. Third, a poor knowledge of the core principles and purpose of leadership. And fourth, the lack of knowhow to identify and select a transformative leader to bring about desirable societal change (Markussen & Tyran, 2017).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Governance is a term that is used freely yet its determinate nature is not fully understood. Governance can be described as giving voice to the people; enabling the safety, security, welfare and socio-economic advancement of a community under the rule of law (Kaufmann et al., 1999). In other words, a leader granted authority over a community can direct and determine its near term destiny by the power that community vests in them. However, nobody in a community exists outside governance structure. Therefore, if an election is the legitimate process of installing a leader in a community, everyone in that community becomes subject to that authority. Voter apathy can therefore be described as not voting in a legitimately called election. Since the non-voter cannot escape the umbrella of governance in the community, the apathetic voter suggests that they do not care about the leadership they receive in that community (Hilliard & Kemp, 1999). But more importantly, voter apathy suggests that the elected leader need not care about the will of the people in that community and may freely exercise their personal will in governance matters. Voter apathy opens doors to apathetic leadership. Apathetic leadership has limited loyalty to follow through with the will of the people. Such leadership is not wholly bound to use power in favor of the people or make a commitment to good governance (Rotberg, 2014).

Democracy, as famously described by Abraham Lincoln is a “Government of the people, by the people and for the people” (Goodwin, 2005). It offers the citizenry an opportunity to participate in selecting leadership that is aligned with their own destiny. The leaders job, in this context, is to facilitate the aggregate dreams and well-being of a society to determine their future (Annan, 2012). Nonetheless, democracy has its drawbacks. For example, the cost of mobilizing a citizenry to participate in the political process is a massive undertaking fraught with logistical challenges. Majority decisions are not always ethical or even the best option, neither is popularity a measure of leadership genius (Miller, 2022). However, the privilege to vote comes with a huge responsibility to safeguard the freedom, security and peace of the country. Registered voters, may be independent individuals, but they are also responsible for determining governance outcomes for and on behalf of underage family members, the youth, future generations, non-voters (who have an interest in election outcomes) as well as apathetic voters who may not vote, but depend on those who vote to make the best selection of political leaders in their interest.

The pendulum of power swings from the people to elected leaders over a political term. The people only hold power of sway for the brief period in which balloting takes place while the elected leaders exercise power for the rest of the political term. The efficacy of the ballot outcome sets the policy agenda and caps the level of expected socio-economic achievement during that term. However, countries in which voter turnout is low tend to register poor socio-economic advancement, while countries with higher voter turnout tend to enjoy progressive benefits of an advancing society (NationMaster, 2022). Registered voters may determine not to vote out of fear, marginalization or indifference. However, the non-voter wastes the opportunity to safeguard their own prosperity and fails to secure their socio-economic destiny and that of the nation (Sumner, 1914). Even though voting may involve the freedom of choice, the non-voting electorate appear to make a pious distinction between personal freedoms and one’s public responsibility for the overall social good (Okullu, 2003). The non-voter denies the nation their considered opinion to the collective will of the populace. The impact of voter apathy in democratic processes are reflected in the following cases that highlight why voter participation is important.

In the contested presidential vote and the resulting post-election violence in Kenya in the 2007 general elections, 30% of the registered voters did not cast their ballot. The voter turnout was 69.09% (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, 2010). The contested vote difference that triggered the violence was 225,174 (0.016%) of the 14,296,180 registered voters. It would be reasonable to assume that had the non-voting 30% cast their ballots, the margin of error would have been reduced and the margin of victory would have been substantially larger and enough to resolve the impasse (Abuya, 2009). Voter apathy may well have contributed to the resulting unrest that saw 1000 dead and thousands of others displaced (Harneit-Sievers & Peters, 2008). In 2002, the women of Liberia woke up from nearly 150 years of poor governance, bad leadership and civil war to assert their influence on the nation's destiny. They used their votes to re-establish a democratic process that installed Ellen Sirleaf Johnson as the first woman president in Liberia. Leymah Gbowee and others mobilized the marginalized women vote from the streets to the markets, mosques and churches and made it count in the destiny and direction of the nation.

The people of Liberia found a voice in the democratic vote not in violence (Sirleaf, 2009). In South Africa voter negligence and the assumption that a democratic process wouldn't allow the passage of an unpopular government agenda led to the election of the National Party and the passage of apartheid (Waddy, 2010). It would take almost half a century for the will of the people to be expressed in the election of Nelson Mandela (Mandela, 1990). The mobilization of elections in Sudan brought an end to conflict, the birth of a nation and peace to the region. The willingness of parties to engage in a democratic process to end civil atrocities would not have come to an end if the people withheld their participation at the ballot to establish the will of the people (Annan, 2012). These cases demonstrate the extremes of voter negligence, indifference, exclusion and marginalization of voting blocks. They highlight the dangers of non-participation in elections and the democratic process. They point to the need to eliminate voter apathy in all its forms for the benefit of establishing a stable democracy. Voter apathy is a threat to peace, security and wealth creation among the populace and compromises the quality of the democratic process. It creates lack of ownership of election results and robs society of the expression of the ideals of Africa's rich cultural diversity (Ncube, 2010). Voting engenders patriotism and poll results provide a mosaic picture indicating how they would like to be governed.

During electioneering periods in Africa, voters face major internal conflict in selecting political leaders due to the narrow understanding of the power and purpose of leadership. Politicians are able to twist many a voter to mistakenly believe that leadership is obtained by tribal association and not necessarily by education, training, experience or even political memoranda (Adams & Agomor, 2015). Politicians may also lure voters to vote for them through the mobilization of flashy campaigns, money and other electoral goodies such as T-shirts and trinkets for which citizens happily trade their votes. However, "leadership is not politics and politics is not leadership" (Bukusi, 2017). Leadership is the capacity to accomplish a vision. It is the quality that determines the accomplishment of a corporate mission or the successful establishment of an enterprise. Transformative leaders help people realize their dreams and facilitate the achievement of their social-economic goals in the face of complex environmental change (Caldwell et al., 2012). Competent leaders are able to successfully navigate such environments to get people to their goals (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Governments need good quality leadership to accomplish the will and safeguard the wellbeing and destiny of the people (Rylander, 2010). However, a substantive understanding of leadership theory is required among voters to elect effective modern leaders. The Big man and Trait theories had their day

in terms of autocratic and authoritative leadership. However, in a democracy, the application of humanistic, strategic and contingency leadership theory is crucial to advance the will of the people (Nohria & Khurana, 2010). The voting season is therefore a critical point of reflection for every voter to select appropriate leadership to help the nation navigate the future (Tetty, 2012). Long before entering the balloting area, each voter needs to ponder on, 1) “What do I want as a person for my community from the next government” and, 2) “What leadership guarantees do I have that a specific candidate can deliver these outcomes?”

## **DISCUSSION**

The popular mantra of “one man one vote” raises the question of equality and equity in the quality of vote outcomes. Vote outcomes depend on the quality of voters. The peasant farmer, for example, votes in the hope of meeting his immediate needs. The empowered voter considers higher democratic virtues such as freedom of enterprise. However, the peasant majority overshadows the vote of the empowered minority. Voter empowerment is required to bring parity between these two voter perspectives for higher quality of vote outcomes. This difference in voter aspirations between the poor majority and enlightened minority may be the reason why African democracies fail to entrench higher democratic ideals in national policy and governance matters (Bogaards, 2007). It may also be the reason behind the poor parliamentary performance of popular politicians. Politicians in African democracies understand this dilemma and get elected to office by aligning themselves with the base needs of their electorate, rather than making commitment to high democratic ideals. Politicians in Africa see no need follow through with party manifestos which are considered secondary documents of accountability. Civic empowerment achieved through voluntary women groups, youth associations, farmer societies, community associations and religious institutions alongside operational political parties improve the electorate experience in the democratic process at the micro level. This empowers society to make quality leadership and governance choices in a general election at the macro level as the people derive social and economic benefits from a democratic culture (Mw Makumbe, 1998). Similarly, the establishment of civil society groups allows for the emergence and identification of servant and transformative leaders attuned to a cause and the will of the people they lead. Such leadership is attuned to the needs, wants and desires of the electorate on the ground. However, such leaders can also be mobilized and called upon to serve the national interest (Patel & Wahman, 2015).

## **PROPOSITION**

In order for high quality leadership to make it through the balloting process to the occupancy of governance offices, voters need understanding and empowerment to select the best person available to take on the leadership challenge on their behalf (Markussen & Tyran, 2017). The educated voter knows how to correctly place the ballot in the box, but the empowered voter knows whom to select to raise the bar of leadership in a constituency. It may be beyond the voter to determine who will stand for elective office, but it is in the power of the voter to select the best from among those who present themselves by evaluating their attitude, aptitude, benevolence, character, diligence and experience.

Attitude can be described as “a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically one that is reflected in a person's behavior” (Oxford, 2018). Attitude is expressed in ones of affiliation, tolerance and acceptance of others. While a leaders’ attitude can be quickly projected during a short interaction, assessing their aptitude for the task can be a much more technical process. “Aptitude is the capacity to acquire Skill – potential for talent” (Hogan, 2015). Many “good” leaders may fail to achieve leadership outcomes because they lacked the

aptitude to carry out the specific task. Even though they are emotionally really nice people. Many voters may also ignore both attitude and aptitude and simply cast their ballot for leaders they admire (Oginde, 2011). Effective leaders need a substantial measure of attitude and aptitude for the task ahead and may benefit from a good measure of admiration. Under normal circumstances, benevolence is service oriented, philanthropic and sacrificial. However, it does not need to dish out money to get attention. In Africa politicians come to the ballot season with short term goodies to buy their way back to office. They come with appealing platitudes and well-practiced public displays of altruism. Voters need to assess the authenticity of the leader by looking for evidence of sacrificial service (Moss & Barbuto, 2010). While character is listed third in this criteria, it is in fact first and overarching over the others.

Voters need to determine whether the candidate display a consistent, commitment and courage to realistically address the issues of the day. Voters may need to beware of the proverbial leopard standing among sheep and promising to never eat them. Transformative leaders have a track record of transformation. This observation suggests that unproven leaders may be a high risk public investment. The diligence, discipline and determination of a politician to follow through, execute and implement election promises is a transformative competence (Shields, 2011). However, just like character, these qualities must be in evidence long before the candidate presents themselves for election. Those who have mastered the positive aspects and skills of visioning, strategy execution, plan implementation to see projects through to a socially beneficial close, may be the surest guarantee of a transformative leader (Montuori & Donnelly, 2017). There are the experienced, educated, exposed and experts in various fields that will also be seeking public office. But before voters fall for the, “I have long experience” ruse, experience should translate to the accumulation of valuable wisdom, competence and knowhow that can be applied for the creation and establishment of societal benefit (Thomas, 2008). This kind of experience may not need long exposure, but should be evident in the candidate’s ability to bring that education, exposure and expertise to bear for the well-being of a society. Despite the claim that leaders beguile susceptible voters to assume office (Padilla et al., 2007), it is the voters’ responsibility to distinguish truth from lies, fact from fiction and make a futuristic decision for the national good.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

While more research is required to determine the varied effects of voter apathy on governance outcomes, voter turnout may be a strong indicator of the quality of leadership and governance strength in a country. Non-voting blocs need to be challenged to participate in the political process as their effect may have a greater negative impact on the quality of the emergent leadership and national governance than simply the number of uncast votes. African governments and election managers should put in great effort to mobilize voters and maximize voter turnout by ensuring ease of access, security and efficiency of the balloting process. Public attention needs to be drawn to the negative impact of apathetic voters on electoral outcomes. There may also be need to require the mandatory publication of candid leadership profiles of political aspirants. These profiles will empower voters to make informed and apt choices of leaders rather than beguiled decisions based on electioneering propaganda.

However, the assumption here is that all registered voters are independent, knowledgeable, capable and competent to make rational, reasoned and ethical decisions for their own good and the overall socio-economic benefit of the community. Finally, it may be the duty of every social institution from the family to the church, mosque, religious orders, community institutions and corporate organizations to run programs to alert and remind citizens of their social responsibility to vote and ensure the election of the highest quality leadership in every election.

## CONCLUSION

In order to realize the benefits and advance democracy in African nations, every eligible voter should cast their ballot as a civic duty, but also as a generational responsibility to contribute to the shaping, design and evolution of a democratic culture that reflects the unique strategic hopes, dreams and will of the people of Africa. Every vote cast cements the foundations of peaceful, secure and prosperous African democracies for generations to come.

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