

The Impact of Civic Education on Political Participation in the Sissala East District of the Upper West Region of Ghana

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Abstract

A country's democracy is entrenched when its citizenry participate actively in its democratic processes. This realisation has been the driving force for democratic nations, including Ghana, to implement civic education programmes to enlighten the citizenry on civic issues in order to enhance their democratic participation. This study explored the impact of civic education by the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) on political participation in the Sissala East District of the Upper West Region of Ghana. The study, which is an Mphil thesis, benefitted from both secondary and primary data, as well as the quantitative and qualitative research strategies for data collection and analysis. The study suggests that beneficiaries of civic education in the study area had high level of political participation, including the readiness to vote, join political party, contest elections, participate in community service and demanding accountability from duty bearers. This confirms the Civic Voluntarism Model's (CVM) thesis that civic education enhances political consciousness and activism. The study also suggests that the NCCE, which is constitutionally mandated to educate the citizenry on their civic rights and responsibilities in Ghana, encountered a series of challenges in the execution of its mandate. To ensure increased political consciousness and activism in the study area and elsewhere in the country, the study recommends that civic education needs to be stepped up in the country. To ensure this, the funding needs of the Commission need to be scaled up.

Key Words: Civic Education, Political Participation, NCCE, Sissala East District

Introduction

To entrench Ghana's democratic dispensation through effective participation of the citizenry in the democratic process, the 1992 Constitution of Ghana provided for the establishment of the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) with the responsibility to sensitize the citizenry on their rights and obligations as spelt out in the Constitution and to perform any other duty as may be directed by Parliament.

This paper is an extract of an MPhil thesis that investigated the impact of civic education by the NCCE on political participation in the Sissala East District of the Upper West Region of Ghana. The paper has been organised into three sections. The first and second sections focus on contextual and conceptual analysis while the third dwells on the discussion of results of the study.

The Context of the Paper

Electoral turnout and voting, which are the cornerstone of the democratic political process, have been reported to be on the decrease over the last decades in almost all European countries (O'Toole et al. 2003). For instance, a study by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) on voter turnout by age in 15 European democracies concludes that a decline in youth voter turnout was a serious and widespread problem for contemporary democracies (IDEA, 1999). Similarly, in 2001, just 59.1% of the electorate in the Republic of South Africa voted and not only did this represent a drop of over 12% of the turnout in 1997, it was also the lowest level of voter participation since 1918 (Phelps, 2006). De Brito (2010) adds that in recent years in Southern Africa, there were several elections in the region marked by extremely low voter turnout (less than 50%). These included the Mozambique elections of 2004 and 2009, the Lesotho election of 2007 and the Zambian presidential election of 2008.

This trend has been evident in the Ghanaian electioneering process in recent times. For instance, in the first District Level Elections or Local Government Elections in 1988, voter turnout at the national level was 59.3%, which declined in the second elections in 1994 to 29.3%. While there was an increase in the third elections in 1998 to 41.6%, there was a decline again in the fourth elections in 2002 to 31.1%. Of course, the figure rose again in the fifth elections in 2006 to 39.3% (NCCE, 2010). This trend was also evident in the Sissala East District in the 2008 and 2012 Presidential Elections as voter turnouts were 89.4% and 72% respectively (Electoral Commission, 2014). It was also noted in the District Assembly election of 2002 in the district that voter turnout was 63% while in 2010, the figure declined to 54.8%.

It is obvious then, that if this situation is not checked, it could have negative consequences on the sustainability of democratic governance and the credibility of political leaders elected in such elections since their legitimacy is determined by smaller proportions of the citizenry. This, therefore, explains the reason for which attention is accorded civic education as illustrated by Galston (2001: 217) as follows: "One of the oldest topics in political theory, Civic Education, is once more on the radar screen of contemporary political science." Finkel (2011) attest to this by indicating that civic education was extremely popular in the 1990s as a means of promoting democracy especially as espoused by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which spent between 30 and 50 million United States Dollars annually on civic education between 1990 and 2005.

Similarly, Browne (2013) notes that a lot of the current literature on civic education has focused more on elections and voter education, although Bawa (2011) indicates that civic education programmes take many forms, ranging from voter education to long-term human rights workshops to the promotion of civic dialogue. Browne (2013) adds that much of civic education is conducted in schools where the thematic focus is on youth and youth engagement. For Sydney and San (1975), civic education is also conducted for people who are out of school. Thus, the prominence given civic education is an indication that it is the panacea to reversing the disinterest shown by citizens in their engagement in political activities.

According to Branson (1998), there is a lot of evidence that no country has achieved the level of understanding and acceptance of the rights and responsibilities among the totality of its citizens that is required for the maintenance and improvement of any constitutional democracy. He advances that Americans should realize that civic education is essential to sustain constitutional democracy. In addition, Branson (1998) argues that the habits of the mind, as well as those of the heart, the dispositions that inform the democratic ethos, are not inherited but acquired through conscious learning. Civic education, therefore, is or should be a prime concern for the sustenance of democratic governance. For Branson (1998), it is imperative that educators, policymakers and members of civil society make the case for civic education for all segments of society. This is because the implementation of civic education programmes might influence people's awareness levels of the occurrences around them so that they will develop the interest to participate in political activities.

Thus, the lack of effectiveness of civic education in most countries has sparked off interest in the study of the link between it and political participation. For example, Ekman and Amnå (2009) adduce that, in the past two decades, the world has witnessed a growing academic interest in political participation in the established or old democracies. They advance that much of this scholarly interest seems to be justified by a concern about declining levels of civic engagement, low electoral turnout and eroding public confidence in the institutions of representative democracy. Similarly, Riley et al. (2010) have shown that some places are currently experiencing a period of alienation from traditional politics, suggesting that civic education is failing to achieve its objectives since this is happening in the midst of civic education campaigns.

This situation seems to be a general trend across the globe, including Ghana in recent times. In the case of Ghana, as indicated earlier, the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) has been established by the NCCE Act (Act 452) (NCCE, 2011) in 1993 as a constitutional body charged with the responsibility of sensitizing the citizenry on the Constitution of Ghana and to perform any other duty as may be directed by Parliament. Thus, the Commission has been given a broad mandate to promote political participation in the country through awareness creation on the principles and objectives of the Fourth Republican Constitution of Ghana (NCCE, 2011). In this regard, the Commission is mandated to educate and encourage the citizenry to defend the Constitution. It is also required to formulate, implement and administer programmes intended to inculcate in Ghanaians the appreciation of their rights and obligations. For Bawa (2011), therefore, the NCCE has the potential to contribute enormously to citizens' participation in governance as it has nationwide coverage.

However, the Commission does not seem to be discharging its mandate satisfactorily. This is evident by the low and dwindling levels of voter turnout at elections over the years as illustrated earlier. This obviously points to

dwindling interest in political participation in the country. Similarly, citizens seem apathetic engaging in community service as they stand aloof expecting the state to do everything for them. This is evident by the ongoing national sanitation exercise initiated by the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development to rid the nation of filth. This is clearly an activity that was hitherto undertaken by communities themselves in the form of communal labour due to high level of civic responsibility then.

The question, therefore, arises as to whether the NCCE has been effective in carrying out its mandate as espoused by law. If not, why is the Commission unable to do so? Is there any link between civic education and political participation at all? These questions and so many others informed this study. In the Sissala East District, the NCCE has been conducting Civic Education activities since its establishment the District in 1994. However, these activities have not been assessed to determine how they influence political participation in the District. This, therefore, makes the activities of the Commission in the area worth investigating.

Conceptual Analysis

Civic Education

According to Dahl (2002), civic education is the type of education that fosters youths' democratic attitudes, skills and knowledge to engage and work on important public issues and make Democracy a way of life. He adds that civic education aims to equip boys and girls for life in the public realm and engages them in the analysis of major rules and regulations of society, public and private institutions, actors and vital social issues that enable them to find ways to resolve social problems. According to him, there are four realms of civic education, including socialization, participation, humanization and faith in democracy and acquisition of knowledge about civic competence.

For Dahl (2002), the realm of socialization involves the socialization of youth in terms of learning and the creation of awareness of children and youths about their families and communities, human rights and duties, as well as participation in social life. The participation realm relates to citizens' engagement in the institutional life of the state, the market, civil society and the achievement of collective consciousness. The humanization realm refers to the public life by which citizens develop an understanding of the national obligations beyond borders, as well as the connections between locality, nationality and humanity. With regard to faith in democracy and acquisition of knowledge about civic competence, Dahl (2002) indicates that it is the process of gaining access to, and influence over, every decision affecting their life, liberty and property.

In a similar vein, the UNDP Democratic Governance Group (2004) indicates that civic education typically comprises three elements. The first relates to Civic Disposition, which means that citizens develop the confidence to participate in civic life and take up the roles, rights and responsibilities that are associated with citizenship in a democratic system. They also adopt and internalise basic democratic values, such as tolerance and fairness and exercise their rights and responsibilities in a responsible manner. The second relates to Civic Knowledge, which means that citizens understand their political context and that they know their social, economic, political and civil rights. Thus, they understand how the democratic political system operates and know the roles and responsibilities of ordinary citizens, as well as political leaders. Finally, Civic Skills, which means that citizens acquire the ability to explain, analyse, interact, evaluate, defend a position, and monitor processes and outcomes. That is, they use their knowledge for informed participation in civic and political processes.

The concept, as used in this study, means education for adult citizens that seek to accomplish a number of general goals, such as imparting knowledge about democratic practices and institutions; rights and responsibilities; electoral processes; enlightenment on critical social and economic issues; and encouraging active participation in politics and/or community service.

Political Participation

Huntington and Nelson (1976:3) define Political Participation as "activity by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making". For Munroe (2002), political participation is the degree to which citizens are exercising their right to engage in political activities, including staging protests, speaking freely, voting, influencing or getting more actively involved in democratic processes. Similarly, the USAID (2002) broadly defines Political Participation to include a range of activities, such as voting, taking part in community

problem-solving activities, attending local government meetings, participating in protests, contributing to election campaigns and contacting elected officials.

In the case of America, Brady (2003) indicates that Political Participation includes giving money (e.g., campaign contributions), giving time (e.g., campaign work, protests, organizational memberships), giving a speech or organizing a meeting (e.g., campaign events, local boards), writing a letter (e.g., contacting governmental officials or the newspaper), as well as simply going to vote. Similarly, while Lamprianou (2013) defines Political Participation as a set of activities aiming to influence political authority, he also notes that political participation is also often referred to as “political engagement” or “public involvement in decision making”.

Political Participation in this study was considered as the degree to which citizens exercise their right to engage in political activities either directly (e.g., to protest, to demand for rights, to vote, to join political party and contribute to election campaigns, to contest elections, and to contact governmental officials) or indirectly (e.g., to influence or to get involved in government or local decision-making through their representatives).

Civic Education and Political Participation

Many empirical studies support the link between Civic Education and Political Participation (Verba et al. 1995; DelliCarpini and Keeter 1996; Levine and Lopez 2004; Browne 2013). Of course, some studies have also identified negative impacts of Civic Education on some components of Political Participation (Galston 2001; USAID 2002; Finkel and Ernst 2005).

DelliCarpini and Keeter (1996), for instance, link political knowledge to political action as they claim that political knowledge contributes to political participation, that is, the construction of citizens’ opinions and political action in relation to citizens’ interests. They further note that significant differences exist among Americans’ individual levels of political knowledge. According to them, greater knowledge leads to greater political participation and increased the legitimacy of a democracy. They also contend that political efficacy and trust influence levels of political learning. Similarly, Verba et al. (1995) correlate education to increased civic skills. They claim that primary skills, such as reading and writing, are necessary for political participation and that increased education leads to greater political participation. These studies, therefore, suggest that Civic Education promotes Political Participation which has been supported by this study as illustrated in the summary of findings of the study.

Galston (2001), however, has indicated that, despite huge increases in the formal educational attainment of the United States of America’s population during the past 50 years, for instance, levels of political knowledge had barely budged. According to him, today’s college graduates know no more about politics than did high school graduates in 1950. Similarly, Finkel and Ernst (2005) adduce that, despite the proliferation of civic education programmes in the emerging democracies of Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe, there have been few recent evaluations of the effectiveness of civics instruction in achieving changes in democratic orientations among student populations. Their findings were based on a study conducted in 1998 that examined the impact of democratic civic education among South African high school students. They used a series of items to gauge democratic orientations, including measures of political knowledge, civic duty, tolerance, institutional trust, civic skills, and approval of legal forms of political participation.

While the study found that civic education had the largest effects on political knowledge, it also suggested that exposure to civic education per se had weaker effects on democratic values and skills. For these orientations, what matters are specific factors related to the quality of instruction and the use of active pedagogical methods employed by civics instructors. The results depicted that civic education changed the structure of students’ orientations: democratic values dimension combine more strongly, and in greater distinction, from a political competence dimension among students exposed to civic education than among those with no such training. These findings by Finkel and Ernst (2005) that civic education has weaker effects on democratic values and skills are consistent with those of the USAID’s (2002) suggestion that civic education at times has little effect on changing democratic values, such as political tolerance and trust in political institutions.

Theoretical Framework

The Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) (Verba and Nie, 1972) was used as the theoretical framework to guide this study. Verba et al. (1995) contend that one of the most influential explanative models of Political Participation is the CVM. The model has its origins in the pioneering work of Verba and Nie (1972) in America where they

contend that Political Participation is more likely among persons with higher levels of socio-economic resources (such as education or income) than those without them. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) support this thesis by suggesting that education in particular was found to have a triggering effect on voting.

The CVM was later developed by Verba et al. (1995) which continued along the same lines. According to the model, Political Participation is stimulated by three main “participatory” factors, including socio-economic resources (time or money), engagement (interest or motivation) and mobilisation. Education, political skills and income serve as examples of socio-economic resources that facilitate Political Participation. Engagement relates to one’s interest in politics, political knowledge and belief in the capacity to influence politics. Mobilisation refers to the stimulating effects that arise from interaction with other persons in social networks, such as one’s affiliation with voluntary organisations or workplace communities (Verba et al., 1995).

The main components of the CVM, as illustrated above, were applied to this study. Engagement was used to determine the extent to which civic education increased participants’ knowledge about political activities thereby stirring up their interest to participate in political activities. Similarly, Socio-economic Resources was employed to determine how civic education induced participants to dedicate their time and money in political activities. Finally, Mobilization was used to measure participants’ participation in political activities as they interacted with others in social networks that were created through exposure to civic education. On the whole, the theory was useful in measuring the effectiveness of civic education in influencing political participation in the study.

Results and Discussion

As indicated already, this study explored the effects of Civic Education by the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) on Political Participation in the Sissala East District of the Upper West Region of Ghana. The study focused on the identification of the kind of Civic Education issues that the NCCE educated citizens on, the determination of the effectiveness or influence of the education on citizens’ Political Participation and the challenges the NCCE encountered in carrying out its mandate. The results of the study are summarized in this section.

The study suggests that the NCCE educated citizens in the study area on the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, the Local Government System, Government Policies and Social Issues. The specific Constitutional issues that the NCCE educated the citizens on included civic rights, such as the right to life, right to join a political party, right to demonstrate, respect for women’s rights, right to education, right to vote and to be voted for, right to own property, right to freedom of speech, as well as civic responsibilities, such as the need to pay taxes, protect state property, respect other people’s rights, help the police to arrest criminals, and the responsibility to defend the Constitution of Ghana.

In the case of education on the Local Government System, beneficiaries were educated on the functions of the District Assembly, Unit Committees and Assembly Members, as well as the provision of training for women in politics. In the case of Government Policies, the beneficiaries were educated on the need to join the National Health Insurance Scheme, the need to acquire a National Identification Card and the need to participate in electoral processes. The specific Social Issues which the beneficiaries were educated on included the need to participate in communal labour, keep the environment clean, prevent child labour, as well as the need to prevent and resolve conflicts.

As to whether the beneficiaries internalized these issues, the study suggests that majority of them indicated that they had very high or high level of internalization of the issues. The NCCE staff interviewed indicated that, from their observation, most of the beneficiaries of their programmes had internalized the civic issues they were educated on.

In terms of citizens’ Political Participation as a result of their exposure to Civic Education, the study suggests that the beneficiaries’ level of engagement in various political activities in the study area mostly ranged from high to moderate levels, with the majority of them having high levels of civic engagement. Thus, a majority of the beneficiaries of Civic Education had high levels of participation in voting in elections, joining a political party, confidence to contest elections, participate in community service and contact government officials. With regard to joining a protest, demanding for rights and commenting on government policies, the respondents had moderate levels of participation. This, therefore, show that Civic Education had contributed to increased civic engagement in citizens’ civic life in the district which is in conformity with the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) that Civic Education engineers increased Political Participation.

Regarding the challenges that the NCCE encountered in the execution of its mandate, the study suggests that the Commission was faced with challenges key among which was inadequate funding, which resulted in lack of logistics in terms of means of transport, inadequate and inefficient staffing, inadequate in-service training for staff, inadequate office accommodation and what have you. The study suggests that the NCCE's activities could be enhanced if these challenges were addressed.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings above, the following recommendations have been made for consideration by various stakeholders and interest groups that are concerned about the effectiveness of civic education on political participation.

First, regarding the confirmation that civic education enhances political participation, it is important that civic education targets everybody in Ghana as mandated by the NCCE. On that basis, civic education should target the whole citizenry from early ages through to adulthood. Thus, the education should be conducted for both school and out of school persons. For persons in schools, Civic Education Clubs could be organised for them where the personnel of the NCCE could impart civic education to them. In other words, civic education could be incorporated into the school curriculum, and be assigned to the NCCE staff or civic education experts. In the case of children who are not in school, games could be organized based on civic education issues for them. In other words, during or before the start of games that are not civic education related, civic matters could be divulged to them. If this is done properly, it is expected that when such children become adults, they would have enormous knowledge of civic issues that could make them become politically active.

Second, since funding has been found to be one of the key challenges of the NCCE, the study suggests that adequate funding is made available to the Commission to enable it discharge its duties effectively. One way to ensure this is getting the Government to increase the subventions of the Commission. The Commission could also solicit extra funding from District Assemblies, Civil Society, Non-Governmental Organisations and what have you. With adequate funding, the Commission could afford better office accommodation, maintain its vehicles or buy new ones and acquire logistics to ensure effective operations.

Finally, civic education needs to be carried out regularly to ensure that the citizenry is abreast with current issues. Most of the respondents indicated that they did not receive regular and timely civic education on civic issues from the NCCE. The Commission, therefore, needs to embark on regular civic education activities to address this anomaly. When this is done, the people would be abreast with current issues so that they could be better informed in taking the necessary decisions.

Conclusions

This study explored the effects of civic education on political participation in the Sissala East District of the Upper West Region of Ghana. The study showed that beneficiaries of civic education in the District were educated on a series of civic issues, including the Constitution of Ghana, the local government system, government policies, etc. On the whole, the respondents who took part in the study indicated that their level of engagement in civic life increased after their exposure to civic education by NCCE staff. This confirms the proposition by the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) that civic education increases political participation. The efforts of the NCCE in civic education were, however, thwarted by a series of challenges, key among which being inadequate funding. The study, therefore, suggests that, in order to ensure effective civic education in the Sissala East District and across the country, funding for civic education needs to be scaled up by government and its partners, since civic education is crucial for active citizenship and national development.

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