The Anglophone Crisis and Low Voter Turnout in Anglophone Cameroon in the 2018 Presidential Elections

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ABSTRACT

The international political system has radically changed in the last three decade. During this era the global political system has witnessed the enfranchisement of more voters across geographical, racial and socio-economic boundaries than ever before. With the growing trend of democracy, voter turnouts keep fluctuating. Since the return of multiparty elections in 1990, Cameroon has been experiencing a downward trend in voter turnout. With voter apathy being on the rise in Cameroon, the 2018 Presidential elections were no different nationally, but it was more glaring in the Anglophone regions with extremely low turnout. The presidential elections coincided with the onset of the Cameroonian civil war in Anglophone Cameroon, with separatist fighters and the Cameroon government forces fighting over the self-determination and political future of Anglophone Cameroon. This study sought to ascertain the link between the Anglophone crisis and the low voter turnout in the Anglophone regions. The study relied on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data sources will mainly be gotten through telephone interviews and personal observations. Secondary data from books, journal article, newspapers, reports and possible interviews on election issues in Cameroon. Findings show that the Anglophone crisis and separatist threats played a role in low voter turnout, alongside voting age and voter disillusionment. The low voter turnout in the Anglophone regions creates a question of legitimacy of those elections and it is recommended that a resolution of the conflict would help improve the situation of voter apathy in Anglophone Cameroon ahead of the upcoming 2025 Presidential and 2026 Municipal and parliamentary Elections.

Keywords: Anglophone, Anglophone problem, election, reunification, voter apathy.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the population of Cameroon has been witnessing an increase, while the democratic space has also been witnessing some forms of expansions, it is however worrying that the participation of Cameroonians in national elections (in this case presidential elections) has been on the decline. It becomes necessary to look at the motivations for apathy and the possible consequences of this action from the electorate. It has been widely argued that citizen political participation lies at the heart of democracy, however many representative democracies in the world are to varied degrees challenged by equal political participation within different citizen groups in their societies. This can be considered as one of democracy's unresolved dilemmas (Lijphart 1997). As in most democracies in the world, the issue of systematic unequal level of participation in elections is an increasingly discussed issue in many African states (Resnick & Casale, 2011).

During the decolonization era, French Cameroon achieved independence on the 1st of January 1960 as the Republic of Cameroon and on 1st of October 1961, British Southern Cameroons (present day North West and South West Regions) gained independence by joining French Cameroon to form a Federation of two states equal in status. Under Ahmadou Ahidjo as president of the federation from 1961-1972, he centralized power and succeeded to establish a one party system, the Cameroon National Union (CNU) in 1966. The Federation was

replaced with the unitary state system in 1972 following the 20th May referendum. With the resignation of Ahidjo in 1982, he was succeeded by his Prime Minister Paul Biya (Ngolle, 1996). President Biya renamed the CNU to the Cameroon People Democratic Movement (CPDM) in 1985, as part of a series of political changes following a failed coup in 1984. Due to rising demands for multi-partism and a series of protests by a newly created party in May 1990 (the Social Democratic

Front), Cameroon saw the re-introduction off multi-partism in 1990 with the signing of the Law of Association of 19th December 1990 (Law No.90/056). With the SDF Party already established in May, the President was merely bowing to a change of political environment in December of the same year. This drastic (but historic and joyful) shift to multi-partism led to a surge in political parties in a space that lacked a foundation for multiparty politics. Since the 1990's, the liberalisation of the democratic space has led to a surge in political parties in Cameroon with over 50 political parties having sprung up. With increasing international pressure, the government has had to make electoral reforms in 2012. Despite all efforts by both the government of Cameroon and international organizations to reform the electoral code and process, voter participation in elections has shown a decline in turnout for all elections after the 1997 Twin elections with the exception of the 2013 Senatorial Elections.
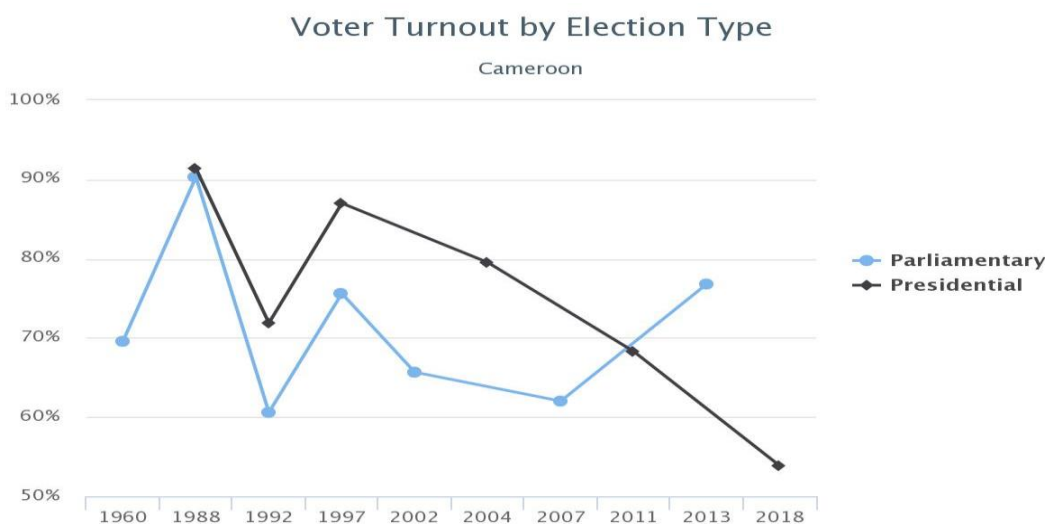

Figure 1: Voter turnout by election type in Cameroon (Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 2019)

In a democratic system of government, the basic role of any citizen is to make decision on any political matter by choosing the candidate of their choice to represent their views and opinions. Elections are considered extremely vital to processes of democratization and democracy consolidation as they are widely recognized as the only legitimate form of transfer and exercise of power in major democratic states. With *"voting in elections is the most common (or the only) form of political participation"* (Baek, 2009:381), Dettrey and Schwindt-Bayer (2009) assert that the presence of large amounts of citizens who do not fulfill their civic duty and do not cast ballots is a sign of apathy towards the democratic system. Put differently, elections are a key mechanism through which the public can influence and keep public office holders in regular and periodic check. The election provides opportunities for the electorates to make retrospective assessments of the government's (as well as the oppositions) performance and exercise some degree of control over their representatives.

It is argued that there can be no democracy without free and fair elections, which allows citizens to choose their rulers. Elections are thus clearly the first necessary step towards democracy, the only way in which people can chose their rulers Tjin, 2023) While a viable democratic system include such elements such as respect for human rights, the rule of law, separation of power, the essence of the transparent responsive and accountable government to create and promote social and economic opportunities and growth, democracy as virtually in-conservable without legitimate, free and fair elections even though elections per se do not equal democracy (Rakner & Svasand, 2013). Elections will therefore be very valuable if it can always meet the criteria for being transparent, free, fair and credible. A poll with low turnout may not be an accurate reflection of the peoples will.

Also, low turnout can lead to un-equal representation amongst various parts of the population. This generally leads to thwarting of the will of the masses and the fostering of non-democratic principles.

Table 1: 2018 Presidential election statistics

REGIONS	INSCRITS	VOTANTS	PARTICIPATION (%)	BULLETINS NULS	SUFFRAGES VALABLEMENT EXPRIMES
ADAMAOUA	433 873	242 529	55,90	3 848	238 681
CENTRE	1 155 161	677 987	58,69	5 374	672 613
EST	322 376	203 865	63,24	2 314	201 551
EXTREME-NORD	1 135 942	821 311	72,30	17 122	804 189
LITTORAL	935 531	512 516	54,78	5 089	507 427
NORD	671 611	368 454	54,86	11 078	357 376
NORD-OUEST	627 068	33 582	5,36	280	33 302
OUEST	726 351	465 079	64,03	5 566	459 513
SUD	266 194	196 369	73,77	1 182	195 187
SUD-OUEST	374 227	59 647	15,94	667	58 980
DIASPORA	19 420	9 342	48,11	205	9 137
TOTAL	6 667 754	3 590 681	53,85	52 716	3 537 965

(Source: Cameroon Tribune, October 23, 2018)

It is very evident that low participation has been a common phenomenon in Cameroon over the years (see Figure 1). While so many reasons can explain, the interest of this paper is with the 2018 October 7th Presidential elections in Cameroon. These elections were believed to be won by the opposition and have been contested by a new comer in the political scene. The Candidate of the opposition CRM[1] Party, Maurice Kamto declared victory on election night but official results later showed he was the runner up. While the elections where hotly contested, it should be noted however that there was a drastic difference in voter registration and turnout in the English and French speaking parts of the country. While voter participation in the eight Francophone regions exceeded 50%, the case in either of the two Anglophone regions did not exceed 16%. This paper argues that separatist threats accounted for low voter turnout in Anglophone Cameroon during the 2018 Presidential elections. The first section introduces the democratic space in Cameroon. The next section of the article looks at the Anglophone crisis and the third section is the methods. The fourth section discusses the separatist activities to disrupt elections and possible effects it has had and then the conclusion.

The Anglophone Problem

Present day Cameroon is a product of colonialism. Following independence and reunification between British and French Cameroon, these two parties came together to form a federation of two states equal in status. The Foumban Conference of 1961 saw the political elite of the Republic of Cameroon and British Southern Cameroon meet to discuss and adopt a federal constitution. The constitution came into force on 1st October 1961, as the Federal Republic of Cameroon was established. The Federation was made up of two states, the former Republic of Cameroon i.e. French Cameroon became East Cameroon and the Southern Cameroons became West Cameroon. It should be noted that French Cameroon attained independence on 1st January 1960 and the Southern Cameroon gained independence by having to vote to either join an already independent French Cameroon or the already independent Nigerian Federation. Conscious of the fact that French Cameroon had a larger population, the only guarantee against assimilation of Southern Cameroons was a federal structure of two equal states. Konings and Nyamnjoh (1997), claim that the political agenda in Cameroon has become increasingly dominated by what is known as the "Anglophone Problem", which poses a major challenge to the efforts of the post-colonial state to forge national unity and integration and has led to the reintroduction of forceful arguments and actions in favour of "federalism" and even "secession".

The root of this problem may be traced back to 1961 when the political elites of two territories with different colonial legacies – one, French and the other British – agreed on the formation of a federal state." Contrary to

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[1] The Cameroon Renaissance Movement

expectations, this did not provide for the equal partnership of both parties, let alone for the preservation of the cultural heritage and identity of each, but turned out to be merely a transitory phase to the total integration of the Anglophone region into a strongly centralised, unitary state. Gradually, this created an Anglophone consciousness: the feeling of being 'marginalised', 'exploited', and 'assimilated' by the Francophone dominated state, and even by the francophone population as a whole (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997:207).

After succeeding to abolish multiparty politics in the country in 1966, President Ahidjo went ahead to push for a referendum in 1972 in which there was an overwhelming support to abolish the federal structure in favor of a unitary state system creating the "United Republic of Cameroon" (Bayart, 1973; van de Walle, 1993). It is important to understand that voting in this referendum was not limited to West Cameroonians who had voted in a plebiscite to join Cameroon on the basis of a federal structure. In 1984, President Biya renamed the country "Republic of Cameroon", and this sparked cries across some Anglophone elite and this birthed the Anglophone crisis.

Konings and Nyamnjoh (1997:207), look at the change of the official name of the country by President Biya from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon in 1984 as another booster to the Anglophone problem. They further hold that, to some Anglophones this action is seen as the boldest step yet taken toward their assimilation. For them, the new name was clear evidence that, as far as Biya was concerned, the Anglophone territory and people had lost their identity and had become an indistinguishable part of the former Republic of Cameroon, thus carrying out to its intended conclusion, Ahidjo's designs to absorb and assimilate the Anglophone minority into the francophone dominated state. Other Anglophones argued that by this action "*La République du Cameroun*" had unilaterally seceded from the union and thus lacks a constitutional base to continue ruling the former Southern Cameroons (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2004:197). To Fonchingong (2013:225), "the assimilation process by processes of marginalizing Anglophones has given rise to Anglophone grievances commonly termed the Anglophone problem".

Following a strike action beginning in October 2016 by Anglophone Lawyers and teachers in Cameroon (Aljazeera, 2016), other Anglophone Cameroonians in the city of Bamenda also took to the streets. In the heart of the crisis, Abiem a Tchoyi identified the causes of the Anglophone crisis to include the criticisms of the centralised state; transfer of decision-making centres to Yaoundé, far from the Anglophone population and their problems; failure to respect commitments to equitably take into account the institutional, legal and administrative cultures and traditions inherited from the former administering powers; non-compliance to the solemn promises made during the referendum campaigns (referring to 1961 plebiscite and 1972 referendum); the change of the name of the State, from the "United Republic of Cameroon" to the "Republic of Cameroon"; and disrespect of bilingualism in the public sector, although the Constitution makes French and English two official languages of equal status (a Tchoyi, 2017). While lawyers and teachers collectively formed the Anglophone Cameroon Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) in December 2016, official government response to the the crisis was harsh and this led to civil disobedience and arrests of CACSC leaders and an escalation of the events into the civil war today.

Elections in Cameroon

Elections have become a recurring event in most (if not all) African states including Cameroon. Elections in Cameroon can be traced as far back as the colonial era where administering authorizes of British and French Cameroon oversaw elections for legislative representations. In the year 2000, Cameroon, for its first time, got an electoral body – the National elections Observatory (NEO). NEO organized elections in 2002, 2004 and 2007 but lacked autonomy as it could only supervise and control elections (Mokam, 2012). This lack of autonomy for this body to run elections and produce results led to further demands for reforms. NEO was replaced by Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) in 2008[2]. Though created with more autonomy, ELECAM's transparency and independence has still been questionable, leading to further modifications of its statute with Law No. 2012/001 of 19 April 2012 relating to the Electoral Code, amended and supplemented by Law No. 2012/017 of 21 December 2012. Following the new electoral code and subsequent amendments, the office of president is for a 7-year term without term limits. At the level of the legislature, parliamentary and senatorial seats are for five

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[2] Law No. 2008/5 of 29 June 2008

years and are eligible for re-election. While the constituencies for Members of Parliament (MPs) are the 68 Divisions, those of the senators are the 10 regions. While all the 180 MPs are elected by direct suffrage, 70 senators are elected by indirect suffrage while the other 30 are appointed by the President. Each region is entitled to 10 senators elected by an electoral college of regional and municipal councilors. Regions shall also have regional councils with 90 councilors.

METHODS

To answer the question as to why voter apathy occurred in Anglophone Cameroon during the 2018 Presidential elections, the study hypothesises that while the Anglophone crisis is responsible for voter apathy in the 2018 Presidential elections in Anglophone Cameroon, other reasons also exist. The study intends to rely on primary and secondary data sources. Primary data sources will mainly be gotten through telephone interviews and personal observations. Secondary data from books, journal article, newspapers, reports and possible interviews on election issues in Cameroon.

DISCUSSION

In the wake of the 2018 Presidential elections in Cameroon, the Country had been going through the Anglophone crisis. Confronted with separatist fighters in the Anglophone regions, the Cameroonian Army has seriously been engaged in a war with its own citizens. The series of events. The course of this on-going way has in several ways impacted the turnout rate of the October 2018 Presidential elections.

The Anglophone crisis and the October 2018 Presidential Elections

Beginning with ghost towns in January 2017, Anglophone civil disobedience was sustained amid government resistance to frank and genuine dialogue with Anglophone trade union leaders. The Government's resolve to crush the protests led it to take drastic measures. The Anglophone crisis took a violent turn from September 2017 as the nature of the Anglophone nationalism in Cameroon gradually became violent with their declaration of the independence with the creation of the *Republic of Ambazonia*. Courses of action amongst separatist groups included terrorist attacks burning of schools and, bombings and attacks on critical infrastructures and security personnel were recorded while public protests intensified (Okereke, 2018).

Following the arrest of trade union leaders like the CACSC leader Barrister Balla, Anglophone had already gotten accustomed to respecting ghost town days and any other days declared by separatist fighters. In the wake of the October 2018 elections, conflict has intensified so much that over 3,000 people have been killed and over 600,000 displaced[3]. This displaced have fled to Nigeria and neighboring francophone regions. With food and shelter being their major needs, electoral participation was not a necessity and also with the surge in conflict, many of these persons had suffered arson (BBC, 2018) in their homes and were left with nothing including voter cards.

The civil disobedience actions implemented in Anglophone Cameroon since January 2017 had a very important impact on Anglophone voter turnout. Before the arrest of Barrister Balla, the CACSC had enforced an operation ghost town on Mondays and Tuesdays, every week, in a bid to force government to dialogue. Following government internet shutdown and arrests of CASC leaders, respect for these ghost towns had become habitual amongst Anglophones. Over time, Anglophone leadership moved from the CACSC leaders in jail to the Anglophone diaspora who transformed the struggle into a separatist struggle. In June 2018, President Biya convened the electorate for the October Presidential Elections[4]. This election was seen to be very promising with some opposition candidates rallying together to support one candidate[5]. While the campaigns were ongoing in the other 8 regions of the country, it was virtually impossible for campaigns to be freely held in the Anglophone regions due to insecurity. Separatist leaders had promised violence on any voters or candidates who take part in

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[3] Crisis Group International.
[4] Decree N°2018/391 Of 09 July 2018
[5] The Cameroon Renaissance Movement Candidate, Kamto Maurice was the frontline runner against the incumbent

elections or campaigns (Aljazeera, 2018; DW News, 2018; Kindzeka, 2018). This fear caused many citizens to flee these regions and those who could not flee chose to abstain from voting in order to secure their lives.

Nlom, a teacher in the South West region had to flee with his entire family to the French part of the country.

"The governor himself who is saying that people should stay back, that they are protected, he is moving around with soldiers protecting him," Nlom said. "Will the soldiers protect all the people? That is the reason why I cannot stay" (Kindzeka, 2018).

In an interview with a prominent women's leader and academic;

"The insecurity in the 2018 Presidential elections scared many Anglophones from voting" (*interview conducted by author, 21/11/2019*).

Most of the candidates for the election, including the incumbent Biya, did not show up in these restive regions for campaigns. Some party leaders and former presidential candidates also decided not to run for the elections.

"Separatist groups have gotten to a stage where they control some territory and have promised violence if the authorities attempt to hold elections there and government has vowed to hold elections there. So the population is caught in the middle" (interview with the Cameroon People's Party leader Kah Walla by Aljazeera, 2018).

These threats to disrupt elections actually caused many polling stations in these two regions to remain shut down on election day, thereby increasing costs of voting and scaring people from going long distances to cast their ballots. Some events of military confrontations with separatist fighters were also reported on election day (McAllister & Kouagheu, 2018).

Many Anglophone citizens were not interested in the elections as they saw it to be of no difference. People are at war and elections are not seen as a solution to the current Anglophone crisis. The separatist struggle has pitted Anglophones into two major camps (*independentists* and federalists). To most Anglophones, the elections were of no consequence to them as the crisis had not been resolved. In a country where elections are alleged to be rigged continuously, citizens will for sure doubt the legitimacy of the ballot box and the respect of their vote.

Other reasons for low turnout

Voting age

The legal age for participating in elections in Cameroon is 20. In a country where the age for marriage is 15, the age for joining the military is 17, the age of consent is 18 and the age for voting is 20, one can clearly see that the voting age eliminates so many people from the democratic process. In the wake of multipartism in 1991, the last one-party parliament deliberated the bill on voting age. While the draft bill proposed 19 as the voting age, this was rejected in favour of 20 by citing so many reasons including alleged irresponsibility of youths in the civil disobedience acts that led to multipartism (Mokam, 2012). In a society where friendships are common across age brackets, it is but normal 17 – 19 year old friends who are ineligible to vote can obviously influence their peers of voting age not to take part in the elections either consciously or unconsciously. Lowering of the voting age will have an impact on voter turnout (Wagner, Johann & Kritzinger, 2012).

Voter Disillusionment

Many Anglophone citizens were not interested in the elections as they saw it to be of no difference. People are at war and elections are not seen as a solution to the current Anglophone crisis. The separatist struggle has pitted Anglophones into two major camps (*independentists* and federalists). To most Anglophones, the elections were of no consequence to them as the crisis had not been resolved. In a country where elections are alleged to be rigged continuously, citizens doubted the legitimacy of the ballot box and the respect of their vote. The failure of civic education to convince Anglophones on the need to take part in the elections is difficult to ascertain because it was not carried out to begin with.

Electoral modalities themselves made the electorate not know much about candidates and their reform manifestos. Interviewed by African Arguments, one of the Presidential candidates (himself an Anglophone), Akere Muna had this to say;

…..In the elections themselves, there are close to 25,000 polling stations. What candidate can field representatives in each of these locations? The official campaign period lasts two weeks and it is illegal to campaign before this period. How can one visit 360 districts in just 14 days? The presidential campaign team, which includes ministers and other high-powered officials, travels the country at the expense of the state, meaning the playing field is nowhere near level. Meanwhile, the state media turns into the ruling party's propaganda machine. The opposition could not produce a single candidate…… This fact discouraged many voters who concluded the process was a waste of time and the result a foregone conclusion. Turnout fell from previous elections to just 54% and was as low as 10% in the restive Anglophone regions. (African Arguments, 2018).

With most candidate unable to tour all parts of the country or even half of it in two weeks, it becomes normal for candidates who do not buy government rhetoric (as it was the case in most English-speaking areas) to abstain from voting. With tallying of results taking over two weeks and the official results being announced by the Constitutional Council, the transparency of the process itself is questionable to many citizens.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to establish a link between the Anglophone crisis and the low voter turnout in the Anglophone regions during the October 2018 Presidential Elections. Other factors identified included voter disillusionment with the elections and a high voting age. Though the Election Day itself was mostly calm in these regions, the desired impact of separatist threats was already in place. Therefore, the foundation of a country's democratic transition was loose and weak, adding it to credence to the assertion that Cameroonian opposition is faced by an incumbent who only reluctantly conceded to multi-party politics and has done everything possible to obstruct, weaken, harass and divide the opposition. The question that can come to mind is the legitimacy of elections during conflicts and that of the elected officials. The elected President is expected to be seen as representing the will of the people but in a country divided like that of Cameroon, should the first-past-the-post voting be used? Would it not be more interesting to ensure that both parties have a relatively fair say in who emerges president? Municipal and Parliamentary elections are due to hold in February 2019. About 80 candidates contesting the elections were kidnapped by separatists in a bid to disrupt the elections (Kindzeka, 2019). Resolving the Anglophone problem is very essential for the 2020 legislative and local elections.

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