

Voting Patterns in Uganda's Elections: Could it be the end of the National Resistance Movement's (NRM) domination in Uganda's politics?

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Introduction

It has been argued that holding regular, free and fair elections is the hallmark of building a democratic society. This is because the election process determines who should stay in office, who should be thrown out of office and who should replace those thrown out (Harrop and Miller, 1987). This process is not only a necessary means to a greater end/good of ensuring that a given population owns its destiny, but is also an end in itself as a fundamental human right. This means therefore that it is important to understand how and why a particular population is likely vote in an election especially for those aspiring to lead.

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However, voting patterns are complex phenomena, which result from an inter-play of varying factors in different circumstances. Generally, both objective factors that cut across a population and subjectively held sentiments determine the pattern of voting and the choices made in an electoral contest. The former may entail among other things the socio-economic status of the voters and ideological persuasion while the latter may take on more sectarian considerations like race, ethnicity, religion, etc...

This paper makes an attempt to put into context the history of voting and the emergent voting patterns that can be identified in Uganda since the NRM took over power twenty two years ago. The paper mainly looks at five national elections that have been held under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) administration; that of 1989, 1994, 1996, 2001 and in 2006. Two arguments run through this paper; One that there appears to be a growing political tilt in favour of the Opposition, particularly since the 2001 general elections, but that this situation does not necessarily mean that the NRM political party is about to relinquish power given the apparent fusion between that party and the state apparatus. And two, that in all the elections which have been held since 1989, there have been limited national issues determining the election results and instead local/regional problems in some areas and personal issues have largely influenced the voting patterns.

VOTING PATTERNS: TOWARDS A THEORETICAL EXPLANATION

Many theories/models have been developed, particularly in the industrialized world, to try and explain voting trends and behavior within a given population. However, the applicability of such theories varies according to the political climate and the circumstances under which elections are held. Indeed, explaining the voting patterns in Uganda (and perhaps in the Third World in general [Ganguly, 1975]) is no simple task for a number of reasons. First, is the prevalence of a culture where everybody must be a winner and in such a situation the

losers have always accused the victors of electoral fraud. In other words, it is rather difficult to clearly account for the voting patterns in Uganda since the elections results have always been disputed. Perhaps this partly explains the extraordinary role which has been played by the judiciary in the electoral processes in the country (Gloppen, 2008:53). Secondly, the legal and institutional framework within which an election is conducted impacts on the outcome, and the most critical institution in the conduct of the electoral process is the Electoral Commission. In most of the elections held in Uganda, there have been complaints regarding the independence and impartiality of the electoral body. Thirdly, apart from the general elections of 2006, the rest of the post 1986 elections were held with a ban on political party activities. This means that for the last twenty years the NRM continued to attract support and the people identified with it as an organization (or party) riding on the back of 'individual merit' principle while other parties remained locked up. Fourthly, there is a problem of lack and reliability of the data provided by the electoral body yet conducting exist polls is an almost impossible task given the sensitivity of elections in the country. Finally, like it is the case in much of the pseudo-democracies, where the electoral playing field is tilted in favor of the incumbent party/president, the recent elections under the NRM, have been largely determined by the power of incumbency. Indeed, the fusion between incumbency and state apparatus has been overwhelming under the NRM regime. In that regard, it is rather difficult to clearly account for the voting patterns. This means therefore that this paper does not pretend to give final conclusions on the voting patterns in Uganda but rather it constitutes the first steps toward a more sustained work on voting behaviour in the country.

Having said that, there are three theories which try to explain voting trends and behavior, namely the *Party Identification Model*, the *Rational Choice Model*, and the *Sociological Model*. In the *party identification model*, the act of voting is seen as expressive, not instrumental, that is, it is a way of expressing a deep-seated loyalty to the party. The party identification model springs from social psychology and scholars at the University of Michigan and elsewhere have developed this idea into what is often referred to as the 'Michigan Model' (Jeff and Gainous,

2002), because it was developed at the University of Michigan in the 1950s. The central argument here is that people will tend to vote for candidates and positions of parties they have come to identify with. The concept of party identification denotes the long term feelings of attachment which many electors develop to a particular political party. The party identification model stresses the role of the family in the transmission of party loyalties (Harrop and Miller, 1987).

As for the *rational choice model* (also called public choice theory), it makes a number of assumptions about individual behavior that is necessary to describe systems of aggregate voting in symbolic terms (Jeff and Gainous, 2002). Under this model, individuals are assumed to make orderly choices that reflect their personal preferences and desires. This debate about the rationality of self-interest in political behavior can be traced as far back as works by Machiavelli, Hobbes and Hume (Jeff and Gainous, 2002). In the rational choice model, voters choose the party, which comes closest to their own interests, values and priorities (Harrop and Miller 1987). Three points characterize this model: voting is considered to be an instrument or means of achieving some further end and there is no room for citizens who vote for a party because they value such a government for its own sake; secondly, rational choice model focuses on the voters' political goals, thus voting is not for pleasing one's spouse, impress one's friends or for any other non-political reason as the case is in party identification model; lastly, rational choice assumes voters are instrumental in their approach to political transformation as to the vote itself and acquire as much information as is needed to make their decision.

On the other hand, the *sociological model* rejects the individualistic emphasis of both the party identification and rational choice models (Harrop and Miller 1987). The sociological model emphasizes the impact of social structure on political parties. It tends to by-pass the individual elector altogether and, to the extent that it does focus on people, it emphasizes the social base of values and interests rather than the mechanisms by which they translate into voting behavior.

The question then is; to what extent can these three models be appropriated to suit in the circumstances and political conditions under which elections have been conducted in Uganda.

ELECTIONS UNDER THE NRM GOVERNMENT

In the last twenty-two years of the NRM government, Uganda has held a number of national elections. These include the 1989, 1994, 1996, 2001 and in 2006 elections. But as I have already indicated, the lack of organized political contest and open, free campaign platforms has been a leading characteristic of all post 1986 elections in Uganda. Indeed, successive legal and constitutional measures placed a ban on political party activities since 1986, starting with *Legal Notice No. 1 of 1986*. Before the promulgation of the 1995 constitution, all elections were held under laws that explicitly outlawed party activity. Even 1995 constitution stipulated under article 169 that there would be no political parties' activities for the next five years until a national referendum would be held to decide whether to return to multiparty or continue under a 'no-party' system. Accordingly, a referendum was held in June 2000 and the ban on political parties continued. This was to become a decisive factor in subsequent elections in Uganda, i.e., that the NRM continued to attract support and people identified with it as an organization or party riding on the back of 'individual merit' principle while other parties remained locked up. It has been argued that the NRM did not feel capable of competing against well-organized political parties such as the Democratic Party (DP) and the Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC).

The 1989 elections

The first national elections under the NRM government were held in 1989 with the election of Resistance Councils (now called Local Councils) at all levels from the village up to the national parliament called the National Resistance Council (NRC). As already noted, the 1989 elections were held under strict anti-party rules since the NRM

government had suspended all political party activities. Indeed, the *Resistance Councils and Committees Elections Regulations, 1989*, forbade all use of party symbols, sectarian appeals, and threats of force, the offer of food or drinks and the display of candidates' posters. The absence of open campaigning made it impossible to discuss policies (Kasfir, 1991). Consequently, discussion focused on the personal qualities of the candidate, their moral character, honesty and willingness to mix with ordinary people rather than on the policies they were likely to support. Preventing party competition and banning open discussion of candidates' policy positions were lumped together, thus voters who were not aware of the policy positions of candidates may have felt it safer to vote for those they thought were NRM members (Kasfir, 1991).

1994 Constituency Assembly (CA) elections

The 1994 elections to the Constituent Assembly (CA) that debated and promulgated the 1995 constitution were the second major elections under the NRM administration. In all, 286 delegates were elected to the CA but the CA elections were not any different from the earlier elections to the NRC in 1989 as they were organized under the 'individual merit' principle. This trend continued in the 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections and to some extent the 2001 elections.

The March 1996 Presidential and the June Parliamentary elections

These were the first presidential and parliamentary elections and they were also held under the 'individual merit' principle. In the presidential elections, Mr. Yoweri Museveni who was the NRM candidate won 74.3% of the vote while his other two challengers, Mr. Kawanga Ssemogere and Mr. Kibirige Mayanja won 23.6% and 2.1% respectively. In the parliamentary elections which were also held on the

basis of individual merit, the outcome revealed that the NRM obtained 156 seats and the others (UPC, DP, CP, etc.) 120 seats.

The March 2001 Presidential Elections

The 2001 presidential elections were also held on the basis of the 'individual merit' principle. What is interesting to note here is that the main challenger to Mr. Museveni this time was his former political aide and comrade in the NRM, Dr. Kizza Besigye. The results of that election indicated that Mr. Museveni obtained 69.33% of the vote (compared to 74.3% in the 1996 elections), while his main challenger Dr. Kizza Besigye got 27.82%. (compared to Kawanga Semwogere's 23.6%) The rest of the candidates; Mr. Aggrey Awori, Mr. Kibirige Mayanja, Francis Bwengye and Mr. Karuhanga chapaa got 1.41%, 1.00%, 0.31% and 0.14% respectively.

One thing worth noting here is that these three elections were held under a political space monopolized by the NRM. Without a clear and evenly leveled political playing field, it is unlikely that the rational choice approach has been at play in the 1989, 1994, 1996 and 2001 elections. And the fact that there has been no political party activity, the party identification model has also been none-applicable in the elections.

The February 2006 General Elections

The issue of multiparty politics has been very contentious in the post 1986 elections. However, a combination of local and international pressure compelled President Museveni to change his hard-line stance against political parties and he in fact campaigned for return to a multiparty system in a national referendum held in July 2005. President Museveni who had pledged to retire after the end of his two constitutional two terms in 2006, instead pushed for a constitutional amendment that lifted presidential term limits in the constitution. This development overshadowed the return to multiparty politics and the

electoral contest zeroed down to a personal contest between President Museveni and his main challenger Dr. Kizza Besigye.

Official results announced by the Electoral Commission showed that the incumbent and NRM presidential candidate Yoweri Museveni had won the contest by 59.28% (compared to 69.3% in the 2001 elections and to 74.3% in the 1996 elections). As for the others candidates, Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) candidate Kizza Besigye got 37.36% (compared to 27.8% in 2001); Ssebana Kizito of the Democratic Party (DP) had 1.58%; independent presidential candidate Abedi Bwanika got 0.95%; and Uganda Peoples Congress' (UPC) Miria Kalule Obote got 0.82%. Whereas the opposition garnered considerable support in the presidential race and drastically cut down on the percentage of votes the incumbent had got in the previous elections, the NRM returned an overwhelming majority in parliament.

So, what have been the voting patterns in the post 1986 elections? And what have been the determining factors of these voting patterns?

THE EMERGING VOTING PATTERNS IN UGANDA

One very consistent voting pattern is that in most of the elections held in Uganda, the Northern part of the country has always voted against the NRM candidates and President Museveni. This is because in the early years of the NRM government, the National Resistance Army (NRA) went on a collision path with the population in Northern Uganda resulting in the proliferation of insurgency groups. Indeed, since the inception of the NRM rule, the greater part of Northern Uganda has hardly had peace, with an estimated close to two million people condemned to live in Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP) camps where living conditions have been rather deplorable. This instability and insecurity in Northern Uganda has been the overriding factor for the indifference for the NRM and therefore the tendency to vote for the opposition candidates. On the other hand, the Western and the Central parts of the country have regularly voted in favor of President

Museveni largely because of wanting to maintain the status quo of considerable peace and prosperity.

From a sociological point of view, the NRM presidential candidate has been drawing the bulk of his support from the rural voters while the urban areas have regularly voted in favor of the Opposition. The socio-economic factors always have always had an influence on the choice of voting especially in the urban areas. The Opinion polls (The Daily Monitor; 2006) also showed that the young voters were in favor of the Opposition while the NRM received the support of the elderly population of the voters. It is believed that this demographic divide has a historical basis embedded in the post-colonial politics of Uganda. The old aged population appears to credit the NRM for maintaining some level of stability in Uganda as opposed to the period of political and constitutional instability during much of post-independence Uganda. On the other hand, the young voters judge the NRM not in comparison with Uganda's past but on the basis of international standards of good governance and democratic practice. Rather than look at Uganda's checkered past and applaud the NRM, the young generation of voters has tended to rationalize about current problems affecting them and the failure on the part of the NRM to perform to their expectation.

Another category of voters who have been hostage to Uganda's past and therefore continue to vote for the NRM are the women. The history of women marginalization and oppression received concerted international attention at the same time that the NRM came into power in Uganda. Thus the NRM appropriated and brought on board the international agenda of women emancipation after the adoption of the *United Nations Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women* that came into force in 1981. Consequently, various measures including affirmative action in favor of marginalized groups were taken to uplift the status of women in Uganda. This has been a big source of political capital for the NRM and the continued electoral support for President Museveni from the women voters in successive elections.

Conclusion

It is apparent that in all the presidential elections (1996, 2001 and 2006) held under the NRM, the northern region, and parts of north east and the West Nile region have consistently voted in favor of the candidates opposed to the NRM regime or not directly associated with it. The north-south divide became evident in the February 2006 general elections where virtually the whole of northern Uganda, West Nile and North East (Teso region with exclusion of Karamoja region) voted for the Opposition in the presidential race and the opposition or independent candidates in the parliamentary contests.

At face value, one would assume that the two sociological factors of ethnicity and regional bias have been at play in recent elections in Uganda given the north-south divide in the poll results. But the leading opposition candidate in the last two presidential elections garnered support from regions and among tribes where he does not hail from while performing poorly in the region and tribe of his ancestral origin, at least according to official results.

In the 2001 and 2006 elections, the youth and the urban elite voters were largely associated with the new opposition political party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC). It is important to note that the 2006 elections were preceded by a 20 year ban on the activities of political parties. What can be deduced here is that long spells of no-party activity alienates existing parties from the youth and the quest for something new when the political space is finally opened.

Another factor that needs mention is the seemingly diminishing role of religion in the politics and elections in Uganda. While the two multi-party elections of 1962 and 1980 were largely dominated by the two old political parties, the DP and the UPC whose foundation largely hinged on religion (with the DP started by Catholics with intent to counter the dominance of the Anglican Church), the new political parties like the NRM and the FDC have not been buttressed by any strong religious base. Suffice to note however that leaders of the two leading religions, that is, the Catholic Church and Anglican Church openly opposed the quest by President Museveni to amend the constitution and seek another term of office as president of Uganda.

But their opposition did not substantially resonate among the flock and Museveni successfully had the constitution amended and subsequently secured an electoral victory in the 2006 elections.

Finally, another trend which has emerged has been the preponderance of two candidates/parties in the presidential campaign races. In the two multiparty parliamentary-system elections of 1962 and 1980, the race was largely between the UPC and the DP while in the two “no-party” elections of 1996 and 2001, the contest was between two individuals (Yoweri Museveni and Paul Ssemogerere in 1996 and Yoweri Museveni and Kizza Besigye in 2001). In 2006, the contest was between two political parties: the NRM and the FDC. This can be interpreted to mean a certain level of rationalization on the part of the electorate where party allegiance is compromised in the quest to influence the electoral result. Supporters of parties like the DP and the UPC rationalized that it was fruitless to vote for their party’s candidate who stood no chance of winning against the incumbent. They thus voted for the leading opposition party, the FDC.

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