

Essay on citizen influence on local policy

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In a democratic country, citizens participation in policy formation is not only a desirable concern, but rather essential to ensure better governance, formation and implementation of people-centered policies. Therefore, it is of critical significance to interrogate whether citizens can influence local government politics. Citizens engage in various activities in local governments that are vital to the running of these governments. Moreover, these governments are formed through democratic elections. The core values of democracy are participation and accountability. Therefore, activities such as community work, voting, demonstrations, protests, campaigns, payment of taxes and bills, contribution of ideas, volunteering for community or state work for both manual and intellectual labor, and donations can be utilized effectively, to influence the direction of policy objectives adopted and enacted by local governments. The ability to influence policies and the politics will depend on the intensity, duration and number of people that will engage the local governors. For example, if the locals decide to hold large demonstration in protest to new by-laws enacted by the County Assembly then the local representatives will be forced to amend such legislation to conform to people`s will. Moreover, engaging with the public through County Assemblies committees before the final drafting of any bill facilitates adoption of all concerns of the requisite stakeholders` views. This encourages compliance with the laws. In turn, the locals influence heavily the policies and politics at the local level.

However, in some cases, the interest of the local residents can be held hostage by the interest of the few political elites who hold immense powers. These are maybe the incumbent office holders who wish to protect their

selfish interests or other power brokers who either have tremendous political or economic powers over office holders. This means, therefore, that there are the ones calling the shots. It becomes a case of 'he who pays the piper ultimately calls the tune'. This may lead to an oligarchy, whereby the owners of means of production as argued by Carl Marx, control a significant number of poor people and decide which ideology the local politics will follow. This occurs when the majority of the citizens are not educated on their rights and obligations as citizens. Moreover, there may also be artificial challenges established to hinder any outsider from attaining power by the oligarchy. However, as earlier stated, the people have immense powers, collectively that they can use to influence policy objectives. It is vital to note that demand for increased citizen participation has been largely citizen driven. Citizen pressures have forced these governments to become more accountable, transparent and operate within the tenets of open government than before. One of the crucial political influences of citizens is information. A well-informed citizenry is not only respected by political parties, but also they ensure that citizens' interests are accommodated. This means that citizens become part of the decision making bodies of political parties, local meetings and other local arrangements organized with the sole aim of consulting citizens on the way forward.

Elections are an extremely significant event in a democracy. This is where citizens hire, rehire or fire leaders depending on the potential they have, the capabilities they deem to have and/or their proven track record. In most occasions, leaders who have been people centered and have delivered considerably on their electoral promises are usually re-elected. On the other

hand, leaders who fail to fulfill their promises are not re-elected. Moreover, people vote for leaders who subscribe to policies that are people friendly and have been informed by the needs of the citizens. This means, therefore, that what the citizens need is a cardinal matter in policies formulation that will get a candidate elected. By voting in leaders that certainly care about the people, elections go a long way in ensuring the leaders cannot ignore the electorate. This makes it easy for local citizens to influence local governments actions whenever there are aggrieved.

However, democratic governance is more than periodical holding of free and fair elections. Rather it also involves citizen involvement in running of government, citizen action and electoral participation. Local citizens if united by similar objectives, have immense political influence on local governments. They can influence programs developments and implementation, create support for agencies and generate ideas. Such influence can only be exercised collectively with unity of purpose. This can be through pressure groups, civil society organization, non-governmental organizations, opinions on public media and fora and use of the courts of law object any policies that one may deem unfair. It is vital to note the significant utility that local governments would derive from citizens' influence and participation of policy formation. It would reduce to absolute extent citizen alienation, encourage compliance, increase communication, generate more informed and accommodative decisions, develop trust and improve service delivery among other things. However, citizens must always remain vigilant to ensure that leaders do not water down the democratic gains of available to them.

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