

## Voter apathy in local government elections: An evidence-based phenomenon in the Berekum Municipality, Ghana

Bernard Kuug\*<sup>1</sup>, Rosemary Osei<sup>2</sup>, Bernice Oteng<sup>3</sup> & William Adams<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Berekum College of Education, Ghana, Email kuugb2000@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup>Presbyterian College of Education, Akropong - Ghana, Email: rosemaryosei30@yahoo.com

<sup>3</sup>Accra College of Education, Ghana, Email:bernice\_oteng@hotmail.com

<sup>4</sup>Methodist College of Education, Aboabo-Asene, Oda, Ghana. Email: williamadam2013@yahoo.com

\*Corresponding author

### **Abstract**

*Voter apathy can fundamentally erode the whole purpose of democracy, frustrate decentralization and the principles upon which it is built. This study, conducted in the Berekum Municipality, revealed that attitudinal factors primarily account for voter apathy than structural and demographic factors. Aside, some unorthodox factors such as corruption and election violence emerged as determinants of voter apathy. This study used a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. Cluster, proportionate quota and simple random sampling methods were used to select two hundred and fifty (250) study participants from four (4) communities for the survey, while a few participants were purposively sampled for interview. The data collected via self-developed questionnaire (Spearman-Brown reliability coefficient = 0.85), semi-structured interview guide and documentary analysis were analysed quantitatively using frequency count and percentage, and qualitatively through thematic analysis — responses from respondents were categorized into themes. There is the need for the Electoral Commission, and other institutions in Ghana, which are concerned with voter participation, to develop strategies to enhance electoral education and voter participation, and to stimulate an increase in voter turn-out.*

*Key Words: Voter apathy, voter participation, electoral education, decentralization*

### **Introduction**

Elections in democracies play the vital role of ensuring representation of popular will and, subsequently, help to secure the legitimacy of the political system. Despite the benefits of decentralization, it is worrisome, therefore, that there is at the same time global evidence of political apathy, the lack of psychological involvement in public affairs, emotional detachment from civic obligations, and abstention from political activity as observed by the Independent Electoral Commission [INEC] of Nigeria and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung [FES] (INEC/FES, 2011).

Voter apathy has emerged as a major research area in the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to its direct linkage to development. The INEC/FES (2011) suggest that voter apathy is as a result of wide-ranging psychological influences; collective memory of historic and contemporary events; trust issues; feelings of efficacy; and political engagement and disengagement at individual, group and regional levels. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that a lack of variety in candidates, poor voter motivation, lack of fulfillment of political promises among others are the causes of voter apathy; this has been less substantiated by empirical research. Voter apathy has emerged as a major problem in mature and emerging democracies, settled and volatile societies, large and thriving economies, as well as small and troubled ones, among youth, women and other marginalized groups as

much as among mainstream dominant interests. This negatively impacts electoral process and its outcome. A study by Hajnal and Lewis (2003) in America perhaps reiterates the extent of the issue by revealing that almost half of all eligible voters fail to partake in presidential elections, however in their own words “*the existing evidence suggests that turnout in city elections may average half that of national elections, with turn-out in some cities regularly falling below one-quarter of the voting-age population*”. Indeed, electorates in the Berekum Municipality are no exemption to this phenomenon.

Voter apathy and low turnout has been linked to a number of factors. Hajnal and Lewis (2003) indicated that electoral institutions are perceived as the primary determinants of voter participation at the local level. They mentioned two institutions in particular — the city manager form of government and non-partisan elections — as causing the dramatic reduction in voter turnout. Also, cumbersome voter registration procedures often cause eligible voters to lose interest in the elections. A clear example from Ghana’s 2016 elections was when voters who had previously registered with the National Health Insurance Card were taken out of the voters’ register and asked to re-register. Even for those who want to register can easily lose interest since the special registration centres are usually limited, overcrowded with long queues and inadequately equipped. This suggests that the voter registration rules can contribute to the depressed voter turnout rates.

Political misconduct and scandals has also been identified as a factor affecting the levels of voter turnout. This contributes to the loss of will to vote because it erodes of trust in government and politicians. Corruption breeds cynicism and cynicism breeds apathy. Again, deceit and unfulfilled promises by political leaders also discourage voters since a number of politicians are unable to fulfil their promises after they have been voted into power.

Hajnal and Lewis (2003) identified economic inequality as the contributing factor to the lost of the sense of community, and hence civic responsibility or duties. Apart from income, Harder and Krosnick (2008) cited the level of education of electorates as a demographic factor that influence voter apathy. From their perspective, citizens with more formal education are likely to vote and each additional year of education is associated with higher turnout. Other demographic factors identified by Harder and Krosnick (2008) include gender, occupation, ethnicity, residency and mobility.

Policy packages of candidates or parties also affect electorates’ decision to vote (Agaigbe, 2015). From her view, electorates will willingly vote if policy packages are in line with their interests and the parties and leaders are those they prefer. This means in a multi-party system, there ought to be at least one party offering the type of aspirants and policies the voters prefer, otherwise no benefit will come from the voting and abstaining will be a rational option. Indeed, when there is no policy package or leader that appeals to the citizens, they simply just stay away from the polls. Voter turnout is worse in instances of run-off elections (Tucker, 2004, p. 2). Turnout is unusually low because contests are poorly publicized and potential voters receive little or no stimulus.

From the foregoing discussion, it could be deduced that a number of factors determine voter apathy in local government elections in the Berekum Municipality. It is against this backdrop that this study investigated the determinants of this phenomenon in the municipality.

### **Statement of the problem**

The exceedingly low levels of participation in local government elections in the Berekum Municipality raise a number of concerns. While both empirical and anecdotal evidence clearly relate varied factors as the determinants of voter apathy, there has been paucity of scholarly attentions grounded on empirical findings that prove how these determinants are related to low voter turnouts during district elections in Ghana, and particularly in the municipality despite the rippling effect on the decentralization system. A study on voter apathy in Ghana by Reynolds (2012) focused on low voter turnouts in the Ashiaman District. The study also assessed the effectiveness of strategies adopted by the district to increase voter turnout. The study only viewed low voter turnout from the actions and inactions of the district assemblies, thereby sidelining factors from the participants themselves. Inevitably, this is a research gap created by Reynolds (2012). Empirical research on the

determinants or driving factors of voter apathy and low participation of electorates during local assembly elections is undoubtedly insufficient in the Berekum Municipality, and this created an empirical gap. Filling this gap by investigating the determinants in the study setting is desirable.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate low voter turnout in local government elections within the Berekum Central Municipality.

**Objective of the study**

This study investigated the determinants of voter apathy in local government elections in the Berekum Municipality.

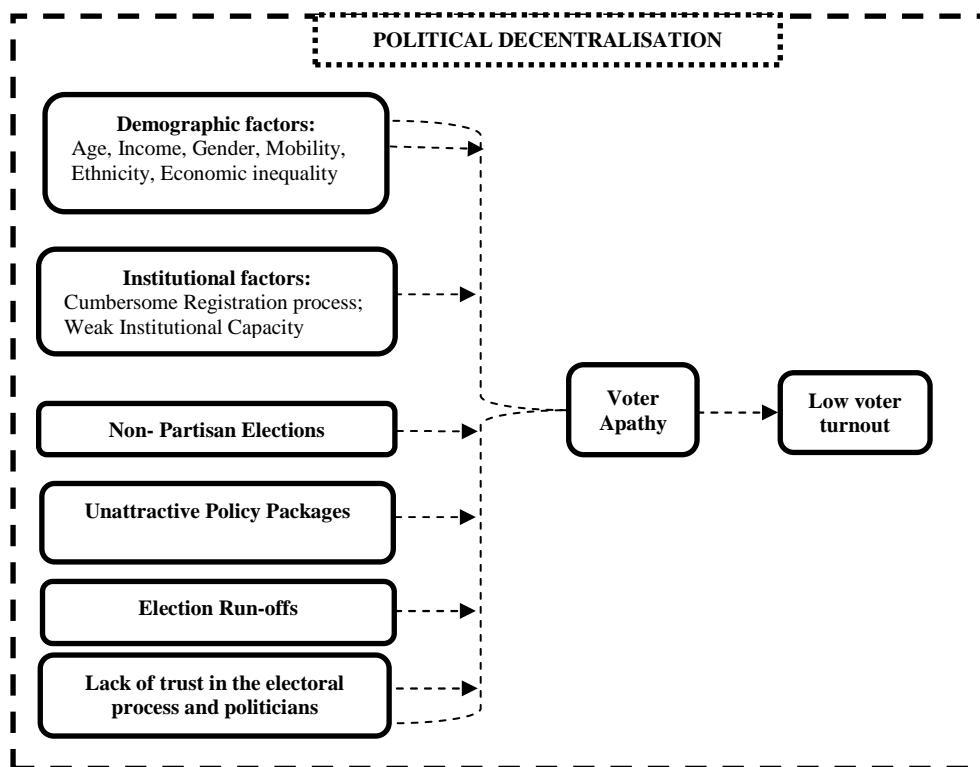
**Research Question**

The following research question guided this study: “What are the determinants of voter apathy in local elections in the Berekum Municipality?”

**Significance of the study**

This research is justified on the basis that many studies done on local government or local level participation tend to neglect the conduct and participation of voters during local government elections in Ghana. Theoretically, this research would contribute to the on-going debate about voter apathy in local government elections to fill the gap in contemporary literature, which has presented the subject of low voter turnout from mostly the angle of voter fatigue, unfulfilled promises and poor voter motivation.

**Conceptual Framework**



Source: Author’s construct (2017)

**Fig 1: Conceptual framework**

Figure 1 describes the factors affecting low voter turnout, particularly with focus on voter apathy during local government elections. This framework identified demographic and institutional factors, non-partisan elections,

unattractive policy packages, election run offs, and lack of trust in the electoral process and politicians as determinants of voter apathy and low turnout in local government elections. Hajnal and Lewis (2003) also identified economic inequality as the contributing factor to the loss of the sense of community, and hence civic responsibility or duties. Taking together these factors mean that, a substantial proportion of the population do not have a robust sense of civic duty to participate in electoral processes. Of course, not all non-voters lack civic enthusiasms completely, and it certainly does not mean that they lack moral obligations. What it means is that for a lot of people, voting is not viewed as a meaningful way of expressing moral duties and civic obligations. The end product is the low turnout equilibrium and a relatively dispirited democracy.

**Understanding the concept of voter apathy and its determinants**

Voter apathy is the phenomenon that occurs when eligible voters do not vote in public elections (Wagner, Johann &Kritzinger, 2012; Franklin, Marsh & Lyons, 2004). It has been compared with a sort of political depression, where one feels helpless and unable to influence important events (Harder &Krosnick, 2008; Hajnal& Lewis, 2003). The major cause of voter apathy is a general lack of agency: citizens may doubt their ability to make a difference, or minorities may feel under-represented in government (Agaigbe, 2015). Additionally, scandalous and sensationalist media reports have also led voters to think of politics as being a less-than-honest enterprise. Another major cause of voter apathy is a lack of interest in the political process.

**Methodology**

**The research design**

This research adopted concurrent mixed methods approach, using the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design.

***Population, sample size, sampling techniques and procedures:***

The estimated population of eligible voters (electorates)for this study was 42, 283from two urban communities (Berekum and Senase) and two rural communities (Adom and Koraso).A multi-stage sampling approach, using cluster, proportionate quota and simple random sampling techniques, was used to sample 250(approximately 1%) electorates for the study. The choice of 1% of the population is based on Dornyei’s (2007) assertion that between 1% and 10% of a study population gives an adequate sampling fraction. The communities were randomly sampled via balloting approach, while the electorates were conveniently sampled. Berekum Municipality was purposively sampled.

**Table 1: Sample size determination**

<b>Community</b>	<b>Eligible voters</b>	<b>Proportions (%)</b>	<b>Sample size</b>
<b>Berekum</b>	33,171*	43	171
<b>Senase</b>	3752*	4.9	10
<b>Adom</b>	3752*	2.6	19
<b>Koraso</b>	1608*	2.1	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>* 42, 283</b>		<b>208</b>

\* means estimated from the Population and Housing Census (Ghana Statistics Service, 2014).

**Contingency:** *The sample was further increased by 20% to account for contingency such as non-response. That is  $20\% \times 208 = 41.6 = \sim 42.n + 20\% = 208 + 42 = 250$*

**Research methods and instrumentation:** The data collection techniques for this study were administration of questionnaire and face-to-face interview. Thus, questionnaire and structured interview guide were used as data collection tools to gather data for the study.

**Data collection and analysis procedures:** In order to ensure reliability of the research instrument, it was pilot tested on five (5) electorates who did not form part of the actual study. The response from the pilot test of the questionnaire was subjected to split-half reliability analysis method. Reliability of the two halves of the questionnaire items was computed using the Spearman-Brown coefficient via Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 which yielded reliability coefficient (r) of 0.85. This indicated a high reliability of the instrument was reliable as noted by Tavakol, Mohagheghi, and Dennick (2008) who stated that the acceptable values of alpha, ranges from 0.70 to 0.95. For the interview guide, the responses of the respondents were compared to ensure consistency. Data were described using descriptive statistics (frequency count and percentage) as well as multivariate analysis to establish relationships among variables and issues identified.

**Data presentation and analysis:** The data is presented and analysed under two basic themes. These are: demographic characteristics, determinants of voter apathy in local government elections in Berekum Municipality.

### Demographic Information

*Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents*

(n = 250)			
Variable	Variable category	Freq	%
Sex	Male	106	43
	Female	144	57
Age (in yrs)	18-25	153	61
	26-35	29	12
	36-45	11	4
	46+	57	23
Residential status	Rural	78	31
	Peri-urban	99	40
	Urban	73	29
Employment status	Public sector employee	61	24
	Private sector employee	79	32
	Self-employed	15	6
	Unemployed	43	17
	Student	52	21
Level of education	Secondary	122	49
	College	105	42
	University	23	9

Source: Field data (2017).

It is observed from Table 1 that the sampled respondents comprised 144 (57%) females and 106 (43%) males. The data shows that 191 (73%) participants were 35 years and below. Given Ghana's population structure and National Youth Policy (2010), it may be argued that majority of the participants were youthful.

**The Determinants of Voter Apathy in Local Government Elections in the Berekum Municipality**

This theme explored the research question: *What are the determinants of voter participation in local elections in the Berekum Municipality?*

**Table 2: Determinants of voter apathy in local government elections in the Berekum Municipality**

Item	A	SA	NS	D	SD
Age	130	27	58	28	7
Education	132	26	45	44	3
Income	102	23	66	49	10
Political interest	121	25	74	22	4
Political efficacy	102	23	66	49	10
Civic duty	132	26	45	44	3
Political connectedness	101	75	55	11	8
Social connectedness	94	46	86	13	11
Voter mobilization efforts	85	49	78	27	11
Voter registration laws	95	84	56	15	0

Source: Field data (2017).

**Key:** A – Agree; SA – Strongly Agree; NS - Not Sure; D – Disagree; SD - Strongly Disagree

All the factors in the table are important positive determinants of voter participation. More than half of the respondents indicate that the determinants of voter apathy are complex and probably interconnected to many social, demographic and political factors. The responses highlighted four major factors (in rank order): voter registration laws (179 -1<sup>st</sup>), political connectedness (176 – 2<sup>nd</sup>), civic duty (158 – 3<sup>rd</sup>), Education (158 – 4<sup>th</sup>). Age follows with 157 (5<sup>th</sup>) responses. Multivariate analysis was done to further categorize and explore participants’ views on the single most important determinant of voter turnout in the Berekum Municipality. The result is presented in Table 3.

**Table3: Determinants of voter apathy in BerekumMunicipality**

Determinants	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Demographic factors</b> (Age, education, sex and income)	44	18
<b>Attitudinal factors</b> (Political interest, political efficacy, civic duty, political connectedness, social connectedness)	121	48
<b>Structural factors</b> (Voter mobilization and voter registration laws)	85	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field data (2017).

The most identifiable factor responsible for voter apathy was attitudinal factors (121) which constituted 48%. This was followed by structural factors (34%), and the least is demographic factors (18%). In an interview, some of the electorates commented as below:

*District level elections are not contested based on political parties. It is mostly a brotherly affair. ... We don't really care who wins because the results are not like the presidential or parliamentary elections where you need your party to be in power. (Audrey, 47 year old female participant)*

*We don't care much about local assembly elections because they don't do anything. What we care about is the national one. That one you want to vote for your party. You want your party to win. If you don't vote some people at another place will choose president for you. So I travel from wherever I am*

*to go to vote. But District Assembly Election is not like that. It is just here so we don't mind "koraa" (Amina, 36 year old female participant)*

*The electoral commission people try but me I don't see why local election is important. They don't do anything. It is not about politics at all. We ... vote according to politics here ooo. If it is presidential election, I vote because I want my party to win. But this local election ... don't think it is important. No politics! Aaaaa! I won't vote. (Kofi, 28 year old male participant)*

**Table 4: Attitudinal determinants of voter apathy in the Berekum Municipality**

Attitudinal determinants	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Political interest	54	22
Civic duty	17	7
Political connectedness	94	38
Social connectedness	129	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field data (2017).

It is observed from Table 4 that the key attitudinal factor which accounts for voter apathy in the Berekum Municipality is social connectedness (129), which represents 52%. This was followed by political connectedness(38%),and political interest (22%). The least is civic duty (7%).Sample interview responses were as follows:

*... most of the causes of high voter apathy spring from the politicians who are put in political offices. Why should people continue to vote for people who do little or at best their work is unknown? How do you vote for people who have little quality? They are always looking for ways to enrich themselves to the detriment of the development of our communities (Emma, 29 year old male participant).*

*... soon after being elected into political offices, despite poor performance to facilitate local community or national development processes, most politicians become richer than they were before they were elected into such political positions (Esiama, 24 year old male participant).*

*... where some citizens feel that the personality or caliber of political candidates isn't to their expectations, they just stay away from voting (Abio, 47 year old female participant)*

This result suggests that issues such as ethnicity and political affiliation play major role in voter apathy. This might explain why turnout in district level elections is low. One explanation might be that political connectedness and social connectedness becomes less of an issue when it is a localised election in which the nearness factor is not a major consideration. This might be as a result of general lack of agency on the part of elected local assembly leaders who citizens doubt because of their failure or inability to make a difference. This is a recipe for voter apathy as noted by Agaigbe (2015), Harder and Krosnick (2008), Hajnal and Lewis (2003).This echoes Wattenberg's (2008) assertion that poor performance of most elected political leaders aggravates high poverty levels which compel most citizens to develop voter apathy. One hypothesis that can be developed is that voter apathy is less during national elections because voters compete to ensure that their political and social interests find expression nationally. This accounts for common knowledge in Ghana about how and why people criss-cross the country during national elections to vote, and which is absent during district level elections.

**Table 5: Structural determinants of voter apathy in the Berekum Municipality**

Structural determinants	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Voter mobilization	44	18
Voter registration laws	121	48
Voter education	84	34
<b>Total</b>	250	100

Source: Field data (2017).

It is observed from Table 5 that voter registration laws (121), which represents 48%, is an important structural factor that account for voter apathy in the Berekum Municipality. This is followed by voter education (34%), and voter mobilization is the least factor (18%). This result suggests that voter registration efforts account more for voter apathy than other structural factors such as voter mobilization and voter education. This buttresses that voter registration issues such as transfer of votes by voters or having to travel back and forth to vote is a frustrating adventure. The interviewees commented as below:

*Another contributing factor to high voter apathy is irregular voter registration. Most people migrate from one district to another depending circumstances or looking for fortunes. And asking voters to always go back where they registered as voters can be perceived not only costly but also a waste of time; especially when the economy is biting hard on such a person. (Manu, 35 year old female participant).*

*High voter apathy can also be attributed to personality and caliber of political candidates in each election. Most political candidates at any level of political representation have some questionable personality; and in most cases, most political candidates demonstrate low understanding of issues affecting majority citizens (Mensah, 28 year old male participant).*

*the high levels of political violence that has characterized our country is another contributing factor to high voter apathy (Adams, 52 year old male participant)*

These findings raise the question of quality of politicians as an important determinant of voter apathy. The result suggests that some voters stay away from the polls because of politicians and their behaviours. This issue is difficult to explain. However, the nature of Ghanaian politics presents several scenarios that support this point. An example of such scenario is perceived corruption by elected representatives. This buttresses the electoral effects of corruption as a factor of election. This fits into arguments that discuss how elected political representatives' conditions of service are not proportional to their respective performance with the former being more attractive while the latter needs much to be desired (Tóka, 2009).

**Table 6: Demographic determinants of voter apathy in the Berekum Municipality**

Demographic determinants	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	44	18
Education	10	4
Sex	85	34
Income	17	7
Location	94	38
<b>Total</b>	250	100

Source: Field data (2017).



Location or area of residence (94), which represents 38%, is a principal demographic factor that account for voter apathy in the Berekum Municipality. This is followed by sex (34%) and age (18%). Education (7%) and income (4%) are the least factors. An interview comments further illustrates this point as below:

*These days, I think women participate in voting than men. ... For example when you go to the pooling stations during the last election, I saw that in the morning you see many women but the men come around as and when they like (Egya, Male Participant aged 25 years).*

*Well, age is not much problem when it comes to voting. Some youth who are first time voters even take the voters identity card only for identity instead of voting. What I see these days is that women participate more in voting than men. ... I don't know the reason but that is what I see. Maybe because of the non-governmental organizations that are encouraging women to participate in elections. I don't know but that's what I see (Edzir, female Participant aged 46 years).*

This result suggests that a particular gender or sex group shows more apathy towards elections than the other sex group. Further investigation is required to develop a fuller understanding of the role of gender in voter apathy analysis.

### **Key finding**

The main finding of this study shows that attitudinal factors account for 48% of the reasons for voter apathy during local government elections in the municipality. The major attitudinal factor for voter apathy in the municipality is social connectedness (52%).

### **Conclusion**

The evidence gathered from this study indicates that voter turnout is very low in local government election in the Berekum Municipality. It unfolds that voter turnout among females was more than for males. These findings were largely attributable to attitudinal factors. Social connectedness and political connectedness emerged as the key attitudinal determinants of voter apathy in the municipality. It is argued that voter apathy can fundamentally erode the whole purpose of democracy and frustrate decentralization and the principles upon which it is built. Careful effort is required to approach the question of voter apathy.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the above findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

- i. The Electoral Commission, Ghana Education Service, the National Commission on Civic Education and institutions concerned with voter education and participation need to develop strategic objectives to enhance the integration of the electoral education into the citizenship education curriculum at basic and secondary school levels.
- ii. The Electoral Commission and institutions concerned with voter participation need to develop strategies to enhance electoral education and voter participation.
- iii. The National Commission on Civic Education need to develop specific voter education programmes to target why males are less interested in voting than women..

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**APPENDIX A**

**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ELECTORATES**

**SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA**

1. Sex: Male [ ] Female [ ]
2. Age: 18-25 [ ] 26-35 [ ] 36-45 [ ] 46+ [ ]
3. Location (type of residential status): Rural [ ] Peri-urban [ ] Urban [ ]
4. Employment status: Public sector employee [ ] Private sector employee [ ] Self-employed [ ] Unemployed [ ] Student [ ]
5. Level of education: Secondary [ ] College [ ] University [ ]

**SECTION B: DETERMINANTS OF VOTER APATHY**

**Instruction:** Please tick [✓] as applicable *per the Likert scale items*

**PART I**

6. Determinants	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Age					
Education					
Sex					
Income					
Location					
Political interest					
Political efficacy					
Civic duty					
Political connectedness					
Social connectedness					
Voter mobilization efforts					
Voter registration laws					

**PART II**

**Instruction:** Please tick [✓] the only one group of determinants that mostly contribute to voter apathy.

<b>7. Classification o Determinants</b>	
<i>Demographic factors</i> (Age, education, sex, incomeand location)	
<i>Attitudinal factors</i> (Political interest, political efficacy, civic duty, political connectedness, social connectedness)	
<i>Structural factors</i> (Voter mobilization and voter registration laws)	

**PART III**

**Instruction:** Please tick [✓] the only one group of attitudinal determinants that you consider to be the one that mostly contribute to voter apathy.

<b>8. Attitudinal Determinants</b>	
Political interest	
Civic duty	
Political connectedness	
Social connectedness	

**PART IV**

**Instruction:** Please tick [✓] the only one group of structural determinants that you consider to be the one that mostly contribute to voter apathy.

<b>9. Structural Determinants</b>	
Voter mobilization	
Voter registration laws	
Voter education	

**PART V**

**Instruction:** Please tick [✓] the only one group of demographic determinants that you consider to be the one that mostly contribute to voter apathy.

<b>10. Demographic Determinants</b>	
Age	
Education	
Sex	
Income	
Location	

**APPENDIX B**

**INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE SAMPLED ELECTORATES**

1. Demographic data (sex, age, location, employment status and level of education).
2. What are the determinants of voter apathy in local government elections in the Berekum Municipality?

**Authors**

Bernard Kuug<sup>1</sup> is the originator of topic and writing of the introduction.

Rosemary Osei<sup>2</sup> reviewed the literature and discussed findings of the study.

Bernice Oteng<sup>3</sup> put the article together, writing of the conclusion, recommendations and references.

William Adams<sup>4</sup> performed data collection and the analysis.