

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ACCOUNT OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

IBRAHIM BABA SHATAMBAYA

Department of Political Science

Faculty of Social Sciences

Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto

Tel: 08039684579, 08022220732

Email: ibrahim.shatambaya@udusok.edu.ng;

Abstract

Political representation is one of the most prominent political events that takes place in most democratic societies. It is eventful not only because of its prominence, but also because of the philosophy behind it, as well as the stakes involved in it. This paper examined the thoughts that brought to fore the idea of political representation. It relied exclusively on secondary sources of data. The paper argued that political representation is philosophically anchored on the growth in population of modern states; the sophistication of modern democratic institutions; the educational and experience requirements for representation, as well as the diverse nature of most modern states. In addition, the need for inclusion as well as protection of the rights of vulnerable groups in the society is also an issue which political representation sought to promote. Accordingly, the paper advanced that political representation has philosophically evolved into formal and informal aspects. While the formal aspect deals with representatives that operate the machinery of government, the latter constitute the voluntary realm, chiefly spearheaded by civil society organizations. In the arena of government, the paper notes that representatives are usually selected through elections or appointments. In the voluntary realm however, representatives emerge on the basis of volition or recruitment. The paper therefore, concludes that, the burden of representation is anchored on the idea of accountability. Thus, any form of representation that is not accountable to the people is counter-productive and ridicules the philosophical bases upon which representation is cast.

Keywords: Political Representation, Election, Philosophy, Democracy, Nigeria

Introduction

States in modern times are organized and operated on the basis of various systems of government. While some are governed by military dictators, others are ruled by some form of single-leader arrangements such as monarchy. However, one of the most accepted and widely practiced system of government is democracy. This is a system of government which evolved in the capitalist west (Ibeanu, 2007) of the United States of America and Western Europe from the 17th century to the 19th Century to spread to other parts of the world such as Asia, South America and Africa from the 19th to the 20th century

(Mahajan, 2008); although the history of democracy is often traced to the Greek City-States around the 4th and 5th centuries. The spread of capitalism as the dominant economic system that governs the international market necessitated the acceptance and/or adoption of democracy by most countries of the world. The result of which is that democracy has now become a norm rather than the exception, especially for most developing countries in Africa.

It should be noted that the nature and pattern of democracy that existed in the Ancient Greek City-States differ markedly from what obtains in modern times. The size of the states as well as other social circumstances in Greece in ancient times necessitated the direct form of democracy whereby every free born, male, adult citizen had the right to participate in the general assembly (McClelland, 1996). This was to be transformed owing to the increase in the number of population of most states as well as the emergence of sub-regional blocs which saw the emergence of super states with super national demographic implications (USA and Former USSR). In addition, the spread of education and the increasing technical capabilities required to run a government necessitated an adjustment of the direct strand of democracy to suit these emerging issues. This resulted in the gradual transition of most direct democracies to an indirect one where the principle of political representation became sacrosanct (Mahajan, 2008). In addition, for most colonial states, where arbitrary borders were designed to suit specific colonial interests, such states became a conglomeration of multi-ethnic and multi-religious systems. In this regard, only an indirect democratic system could suit such complex political arrangement. Thus, the fading of direct democracy and its consequent replacement with indirect democracy across the globe.

Indirect democracy otherwise referred to as representative democracy suggest a system which allows for some people to act and take decisions on behalf of others with the consent of both parties. This process is mediated through the instrumentality of elections (Owen, 2003). It allows for the public to periodically elect their representatives to serve in various official capacities in managing the machinery of the government. Therefore, at intervals, interested candidates solicit for the voters consent to represent them either at the executive or legislative arms of government. The idea of representation into the legislature or the executive arms is usually terminal such that the voters could gauge the performance of its representatives which will serve as basis to determine whether or not they are fit to continue in office. It is in this regard that Jinadu, (2007:26) captures elections in the following words: “.....elections encapsulate the mediating institutional and psychological processes and anchors for citizens, as adults, in an organized and routinized manner, to express their choice among those who seek public political office”. Thus, elections necessarily constitute one of the main features of political representation.

It is against this background that this study investigates the emergence, manifestation and importance of political representation. The discussions will be broken down into a number of sections focusing on relevant themes as indicated above.

Understanding Political Representation

To say that political representation is marred with series of definitional controversies is to say the least (Pennock & Chapman, 1968; Schwartz, 1988). There are quite a number of varying arguments around what constitute political representation. This is further exacerbated by the developments characterizing the evolution of politics with consequent changing perceptions which seeks to explain political phenomena. It is because of this that, few of the varying positions on the meaning of political representation are presented and discussed.

To start with, Pitkin, (1967) conceives political representation as the act of making people's voices heard. It constitutes the totality of processes actions and decisions that situates the public decision making mechanism of the government reflective of people's opinion. Therefore, the act of social engineering which stamps the presence of the people in the political arena through the assistance of others defines political representation. Pitkin while giving an important perspective to understanding political

representation did not acknowledge that representatives are mostly extraction of the elites and thus, represent exclusive elite interest to the detriment of the general public. Accordingly, political representation may refer to the emergence of individuals who represent the passion, values and the interests of the people through the process of competitive elections (Przeworski, 1999). This variant of political representation apart from emphasizing the essence of the idea, it also provide the strategy by which representatives may be arrived at. He recognizes elections as a cardinal feature of political representation. The foregoing definition may be found wanting on two grounds: in the first place, in developing countries, elections does not count and votes may not even be counted (Ibeanu, 2007:3) in selecting representatives; secondly, since representatives may have stolen the mandate of the people, they more often than not, represent only their interest.

Another comprehensive definition of political representation is one which states thus: “a mode of government in which the members of the unit of rule are equal consociates and have the collectively an effective capacity to govern, via intermediaries, matters of common interest (or concerning the common good) qua membership of this unit of rule” (Owen, 2003:115). The logic in the foregoing definition is centered on the stake which all citizens have in the collective responsibility of governance. It places the role of governance and management of societal resources on members of the society who in turn transfer this role to representatives who do not only hold power in trust for them, but also discharge their functions in line with the expectations of the people. This definition may be faulty in the sense that, in most cases, especially in growing democracies, representatives merely represent their interest and not those of the people.

Another dimension to explaining political representation is one which seeks to explain it within the ambit of striking a balance between majority control and the rights of the minority in the society. Hence, the issue of representation in politics refers to the process of ensuring that the majority have a stake in the public decision making domain through consented parties who stand in on their behalf (Pettit, 1999). Given the majoritarian tendency that democracy is inclined to, the idea of representative democracy introduces the opportunity for the minority to be adequately protected by having their intermediaries to actively protect and defend their unique interest in the political arena. However, this position does not quite address the problem of minority interest in that, as minority in the society, their representatives are also in minority at the decision making level. Therefore, no much difference could be achieved because the interest of the minority though it may be heard, but it is most likely to be overruled by majority interest.

Willoughby cited in Mahajan, (2008:722) affirms that, political representation refers to a governmental arrangement “.....which results where a legally sovereign electorate, instead of itself attempting to act as the directing head of the machinery of government, brings into existence an organ or organs to represent and act for it in this capacity”. The foregoing introduces an important variable into the discourse of political representation - legal and constitutional provisions. It means the idea of representation in politics must necessarily be sanctioned and defined by certain extant rules codified or not. Thus, it could be seen in most representative democracies that there are specific rules guiding which positions to be contested for, who is eligible to vote, how are the various political constituencies delineated, what percentage of the votes defines the winner, what the term of office is etc. It is within this context that most indirect or representative governments operate. Despite its illustrious contribution to political representation, it does not reflect the high level of manipulation and distortion of these rules that takes place in the political processes of most third world countries. It is this unholy practice of office seekers in countries like Nigeria that devalue and relegates elections as having little or no impact in determining who represent which constituency. Again Baker (1995) is of the view Political representation implies a system of rule by which popularly elected or appointed representatives run the affairs of the state. The recognition that representatives may be appointed and not necessarily elected makes the foregoing definition unique. It also extends to include members of state agencies and parastatals who are appointed by government officials to carry out some functions on behalf of the people.

Having looked at some few definitions of political representation, it could be deduced that it is a political arrangement that allows for some few individuals to represent a large chunk of people in the policy and decision making processes of government usually through the process of regular elections. However, it must be noted that, this angle of political representation is only restricted to happenings in the formal sector of the state. Perhaps, it is worthy of note that there are some form of representations that occurs at other informal levels critical for the smooth operation of representative democracy which is the widely practiced system of government in the world today. Indeed, the critical roles provided in the arena of associational life, some of which are the civil society organizations, the press, religious organizations, community based organizations among others reflects some pattern of political representation which most formal inclined definitions as indicated in the forgoing discussion do not allude to. The next section discussed the philosophy of political representation.

The Philosophy of Political Representation

In discussing the philosophy of political representation, it is necessary to refer to the emergence of democratic practice in the Ancient Greek City-States where all free born citizens participated in the general assembly. Of special importance was the size of the city states which "rarely exceeded 10,000 persons" (Oddih, 2007:150). However, the growth of capitalism coupled with concomitant philosophy emerging in Europe; the increase in the size of population which required for kings in Europe to seek for approval of some of their policies like that of taxes, as well as the institutionalization of universal franchise necessitated the growth of political representation and the consequent emergence of representative or indirect democracy (ibid). Therefore, one of the most important accounts upon which representation in politics emerged was the size of the population of the modern states beginning from the 19th century. This is acknowledged by Mahajan, (2008:722) when he noted that "Indirect democracy is the only kind of democracy which is possible in modern states on account of their large size".

There is also the idea of limited powers and weak institutions which the direct democracy is fraught with (Manin, 1997). For Manin, in addition to the increased and increasing population of states, the weaknesses exemplified by the institutions of the Greek City-States which practiced direct democracy is one of the major influences that encouraged thoughts on political representation. He added that, there was also the issue of limited powers which due to lack of knowledge and experience of many people in the art and science of legislation and decision making, affected the smooth existence of direct democracy. In addition, advances in science and technology required for the state to be managed by people with a minimum educational requirement and experience of some sort, and since not all people could have such educational requirements, it necessitated for some form of doctrines on representation to adequately cater for the task of governance. In this regard, philosophy on political representation began to emerge depicting ideas upon which modern states could be organized institutionally and how people could be mobilized, educated and strategically placed to manage the functions of governance in such a way that the entire citizens has a stake in managing in it. Needless to say, the plurality of most states owing to emergence of supra-national unions especially in the United States of America necessitated the need for all ethnic and religious compartments of the states to be adequately represented in public decision making. It is thus, considered that political representation could adequately provide a suitable mechanism for the mediation of all concerns arising from the multi-ethnic nature of most modern states. By so doing, every citizen may have a stake in decisions that concerns him albeit through a qualified and capable representative.

Accordingly, the discourse on political representation will not be complete without reference to the theoretical contribution of John Locke who is considered the father of liberal modern democracy (Kura, 2015). This is because modern democracy is built on political representation. In addition, the concept of limited government which is central to Locke's thesis on political power is also key in any study on political representation. This is because; it brings to fore the idea of accountability of the representatives

to the people without which there is no need for government in the first place (Kura, 2015). The issue of accountability as it relates to political representation is discussed in subsequent sections of the paper.

The idea of political representation is also inherent in the need for more inclusiveness in the politics and public domain of the state. In this regard, less privileged groups like children, women, the uneducated, physically and mentally retarded etc. could be adequately represented. The logic of this is that, since representatives act on behalf of their constituencies (Pennock & Chapman, 1968), their decisions and actions may well be beneficial to some of the groups identified above.

Another important variable upon which the philosophy of political representation is cast is authorization. Here, the emphasis is on how the representative becomes one. That is to say, emphasis is placed on the processes leading to the emergence of the representatives and how they enforce or carry out their functions. This is more often than not, spelt out in constitutions. More often than not also, elections serve as means through which representatives are chosen. In addition, some members may be appointed in various capacities to hold certain offices on behalf of the people. In essence, representation connotes the sovereignty of the people to authorize others to run the machinery of government which they have no control over except during elections (Mahajan, 2008).

Closely related to the above is the idea of accountability. Representatives are considered to hold office in trust for the people. They are expected to carry out the mandate of their people. Thus, their actions and decisions are mostly expected to reflect the decisions of the people. Although Pitkin (1967) introduced the twin concepts of delegate and trustee in examining how the representatives respond to their public mandates, accountability is the main instrument for valuing the achievements or otherwise of the representatives. Delegates, within the context of Pitkin's analysis, deals with representatives who only act in strict compliance with the wishes of the people. They don't assume what the people want and as such they are in constant touch with the people in order to carry out their strict directives. For the Trustee representative, he has the autonomy to act and take binding decisions without necessarily making inquiries from the people on all issues. It is believed that he is well informed of the choices and preferences of the people and can act in ways that may satisfy their interest. In any case, all representatives (delegate or trustee) are expected to be accountable to the people since they only hold office for the purpose of serving them (Przeworski, 1999).

Again, Pitkin, (1967) provides additional elements upon which the idea of political representation is built. He summarizes them as descriptive, symbolic and substantive representation. The descriptive element refers to what the representative shares in common with the people he represents. It is in this regard that people are expected to be represented by one of their own. An individual or group that share in their problems and prosperity and not somebody who may share nothing in common with them. On the symbolic front, emphasis is on how the representative sees those he represents. If he holds them in high esteem and sees himself accountable to them, then his representation is justified otherwise the whole aim of political representation is defeated. Substantively however, focus is on what the representative does in terms of actions and decisions and the implication of such on those he represents. It is only when decisions are taken by representatives which will serve the interest of the people that their representation could be justified. For Pitkin, all these variables must combine to favor the people and not just the representatives.

Another philosophy that has been rooted into the discourse of political representation is its shift away from government circles to cover other sectors like the civil society, media and even trans-national activities where representatives may not necessarily be elected (Warren & Dario, 2004). However, members of these groups, associations and organizations are seen to be representing the people. Associational life for example- be it social movement, civil society and non-governmental organizations are groups that come together with specified objectives which in most cases, are to protect and promote the interest of the voiceless people. In this regard, their members are not elected, but they voluntarily

organize themselves to render certain unique service on behalf of the people. It is on this basis that a distinction is carved out between formal and informal representation. The formal angle dwells on government representatives on the basis of elections or appointments, while the informal one constitutes the voluntary realm. Reflecting on representation at the international or transnational level (Dryzek & Simon, 2008) came up with the idea of discursive representation. They argue that, at that level, what obtained are discourses between and among representatives from various countries on issue of common and conflicting interest in various areas like environment, economy, energy etc. Since most these members are not elected, it does not fall under the formal representation category. It is therefore, ideal that some form of explanation is put forward to justify the philosophy behind this strand of representation and thus, the discursive representation of Dryzek and Simon.

Conclusion

The paper discussed political representation in light of its origin, meaning, manifestation and justification. It considers political representation as a transition from the ancient Greek practice of direct democracy which was based on small City-States. However, the expansion and merger of hitherto separate political entities into single political units expanded the demographic size of these states. It therefore, became impossible for all citizens to partake in societal management. This led to the emergence of political representation where few elected or appointed members of the society preside over the affairs of the state and make decisions on behalf of the general public. The paper notes that, in this arrangement, people remain the ultimate sovereign with the elected representatives exercising authority and holding same in trust for the people. Therefore, the former is accountable to the latter who may exercise its power to remove or refuse to return any representative who fails to deliver on his/her mandate.

Additionally, the paper recognizes the changing role in political representation owing to the emergence and proliferation of other non-state actors. Civil society and other trans-national actors continuously ensures that an additional spectrum of people emerge who are not elected, but they are expected to represent the people in various areas of need and interest. In this regard, political representation is said to have emerged because of the increased size of modern states, the need for some form of qualification (education/experience) for people to manage government activities, the pluralized nature of modern states as well as the need to adequately represent the interest of the less privileged groups like the old, children, physically or mentally challenged etc. Therefore, the spread of modern democracy could inadvertently be credited to the infusion of political representation into it which makes the former amenable to the nature of modern states.

References

- Dryzek, J., & Simon, N. (2008). Discursive representation. *Political Science Review*, 102(4), 481-493.
- Ibeanu, O. (2007). Introduction: Election and the paroxysmal future of democracy in Nigeria. In A. Jega, & O. Ibeanu (Eds.), *elections and the future of democracy in Nigeria* pp. 1-22. Nigerian Political Science Association (NPSA).
- Jinadu, A. (2007). Political science, elections and democratic transitions in Nigeria. In A. Jega, & O. Ibeanu (Eds.), *Elections and the future of democracy in Nigeria* (pp. 23-44). Nigerian Political Science association (NPSA).
- Kura, S. (2015). History of political thought: Conceptual scope, methodological approaches and briefs on selected thinkers. In I. S. Ogundiya, & J. Amzat (Eds.), *Foundations of the Social Sciences* pp. 285-322. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited.
- Mahajan, V. D. (2008). *Political theory: Principles of political science*. New Delhi: S. Chand.
- Manin, B. (1997). *The Principles of representative government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- McClelland, J. (1996). *A history of Western political thought*. London: Routledge.

- Oddih, M. (2007). Electoral fraud and democratic process: Lessons from the 2003 elections. In A. Jega, & O. Ibeanu (Eds.), *Elections and the future of democracy in Nigeria* pp. 147-186. Nigerian Political Science Association (NPSA).
- Owen, D. (2003). Democracy. In R. Bellamy, & A. Mason (Eds.), *Political concepts* pp. 105-117. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Pennock, R. J., & Chapman, J. (1968). *Representation*. New York: Atherton Press.
- Pettit, P. (1999). Contestatory democracy. In I. Shapiro, & C. Hacker-Cordon (Eds.), *Democracy's value*. Cambridge: Cambridge Press.
- Pitkin, H. (1967). *The Concept of representation*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Przeworski, A. (1999). Minimalist conception of democracy: A defense. In I. Shapiro, & C. Hacker-Cordon (Eds.), *Democracy's value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schwartz, N. (1988). *The blue guitar: Political representation and community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Warren, M., & Dario, C. (2004). The transformation of democratic representation. *Democracy and Society*, 2(1), 5-22.