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SABBATH VOTING AMONG GHANAIA ADVENTISTS: PERSPECTIVES, CHALLENGES AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Ghanaian Seventh-day Adventists' perceptions and experiences regarding voting on the Sabbath. Through a structured survey, data were collected on demographics, religious commitment, civic engagement, voting behaviors, and proposed alternatives to Sabbath voting. The findings reveal a strong commitment to Sabbath observance, with 624 respondents emphasizing its importance. While 83% of participants acknowledge the significance of civic participation, a substantial number perceive Sabbath voting as a compromise of their faith, with 357 strongly agreeing and 101 agreeing. The study also found that 21% of respondents had encountered a situation where voting coincided with the Sabbath, with most opting not to vote. Additionally, 383 respondents believe Sabbath voting is unjustifiable, whereas 190 consider it acceptable under specific conditions. The findings highlight the tension between religious devotion and civic responsibility, leading to a call for alternative voting arrangements. Suggested solutions include early voting, election rescheduling, and absentee ballots, with significant support from respondents. The study concludes that implementing such alternatives would enhance electoral inclusivity, allowing Adventists to fulfill both their religious and civic duties without conflict.

Keywords: *Sabbath Voting, Ghanaian Adventists, Sabbath Observance, Electoral Participation*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Every individual has the fundamental right to partake in the governance of their country. This right is not only a privilege but a core principle of democracy, ensuring that citizens have a voice in decisions that shape their society. Participation in governance is a crucial mechanism through which people influence policies, elect leaders, and contribute to national development. It empowers individuals, fosters accountability, and strengthens the social contract between governments and the governed.¹ However, despite these universal principles, many individuals—particularly religious minorities, marginalized groups, and those facing systemic barriers—struggle to fully exercise their right to civic participation. Factors such as electoral disenfranchisement, religious constraints, socio-economic barriers, and political repression can limit an individual's ability to engage in governance.

Voting is one of the most fundamental rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society. It serves as a powerful tool that allows individuals to express their opinions, influence governance, and shape the future of their communities and country. Through voting, citizens participate in the selection of leaders and decision-makers who will represent their interests, enact policies, and guide the direction of national development.² By casting a ballot, individuals contribute to the democratic process by ensuring that their voices are heard. Elections provide an opportunity for people to choose leaders who align with their values, priorities, and vision for progress. Moreover, voting empowers citizens to hold their representatives accountable, ensuring that those in power govern in a manner that reflects the will of the people.³ Beyond individual participation, voting plays a crucial role in strengthening democracy, promoting stability, and fostering social justice. A high voter turnout ensures a more representative government, where diverse perspectives and interests are considered in policy-making. Additionally, democratic elections help maintain checks and balances, preventing the concentration of power in the hands of a few and promoting transparency and good governance.⁴ In essence, voting is more than just a civic duty—it is a fundamental means of expressing one's voice in governance, shaping policies, and contributing to national progress. By participating in elections, individuals not only secure their own interests but also contribute to building a more inclusive, fair, and democratic society.

For Seventh-day Adventists, who strictly observe the Bible Sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset, voting on the Sabbath presents a significant religious and ethical dilemma. The Sabbath is regarded as a sacred day of rest, worship, and spiritual reflection, during which secular activities—including business transactions, political engagements, and civic duties—are avoided. This commitment to Sabbath observance is deeply rooted in biblical teachings (Exod. 20:8–11) and reinforced by the doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁵ When national elections are scheduled on a Saturday, Adventists face a conflict between their faith and their civic responsibility. On one hand, voting is an essential democratic right and duty that enables individuals to participate in governance and decision-making. On the other hand, casting a ballot on the Sabbath could be perceived as a violation of their religious principles, which emphasize complete devotion to God on that day.⁶

In Ghana, where elections are occasionally scheduled on Saturdays, the challenge of Sabbath observance and civic participation becomes particularly evident for Seventh-day Adventists. The

¹ United Nations, *Human Rights and Elections: A Handbook on International Human Rights Standards on Elections* (New York, NY: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021), 8.

² Waiphot Kulachai, Unisa Lerdtomornsakul, and Patipol Homyamyen, "Factors Influencing Voting Decision: A Comprehensive Literature Review," *Social Sciences* 12 (2023), 1-16. 10.3390/socsci12090469.

³ Kulachai, Lerdtomornsakul, and Homyamyen, "Factors Influencing Voting Decision: A Comprehensive Literature Review," 10.

⁴ Kulachai, Lerdtomornsakul, and Homyamyen, "Factors Influencing Voting Decision: A Comprehensive Literature Review," 10.

⁵ Kenneth Oppong, Abiodun A. Adesegun and Peter Obeng Manu, "SDA Mission in Southern Ghana Union Conference," *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry* 14 (Aug. 2016), 91-106, 96.

⁶ Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 253-256.

Sabbath, observed from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset, is a sacred day dedicated to worship, rest, and spiritual reflection. Any form of secular engagement, including voting, is generally discouraged within the Adventist faith. This creates a dilemma for Adventists who wish to exercise their democratic rights without compromising their religious convictions.

This study sought to explore the perceptions and practices of Ghanaian Adventists regarding voting on the Sabbath. It aimed to understand how these individuals navigate the tension between their faith and their civic duties, shedding light on the diverse approaches they adopt in response to Sabbath elections. Some Adventists strictly refrain from participating in elections held on Saturdays, prioritizing their religious beliefs over civic engagement. Others, though a minority, consider the possibility of Sabbath voting under specific circumstances, such as national emergencies or moral obligations to support responsible leadership. By examining the strategies employed by Adventists to reconcile their religious obligations with electoral responsibilities, this study highlights the broader implications for religious observance and democratic participation within Ghana's Adventist community. The findings underscore the need for inclusive electoral reforms that accommodate religious minorities, ensuring that no citizen is forced to choose between faith and democracy.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sabbath Observance in the SDA Church

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church holds the Sabbath as a core element of its faith, grounded in the belief that the seventh day is a holy day of rest and worship. This conviction is based on the Fourth Commandment, which instructs believers to “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8-11). The Sabbath is observed from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset, during which Adventists refrain from secular activities, focusing instead on spiritual renewal and communal worship.⁷ According to Jacques B. Doukhan, the Sabbath represents a time of spiritual reflection and physical rest, providing a foretaste of the eternal rest promised in the eschatological hope of the Adventist faith.⁸ This strict observance is a distinguishing feature of the SDA Church and is meticulously upheld by its members.

2.2 Voting and Civic Participation

Voting is a fundamental aspect of civic engagement in democratic societies, enabling citizens to influence governance and policy-making. The act of voting is seen as both a right and a responsibility, crucial for the functioning of democracy. However, the intersection of religious practices and civic duties can create tensions, particularly when religious observances coincide with civic activities such as elections. Studies have shown that religious beliefs can significantly influence voting behavior and political participation. For example, Corwin E. Smidt, and Lyman A. Kellstedt argue that religious affiliations often shape political preferences and actions, highlighting the complex interplay between faith and politics.⁹ The SDA Church, with its strict Sabbath observance, faces unique challenges when election days fall on Saturdays (Sabbath), potentially limiting members' participation in the democratic process.

2.3 SDA Views on Civic Duties

The SDA Church encourages its members to be responsible citizens, actively participating in societal development while upholding their religious convictions. This dual commitment to faith and civic duty is reflected in the church's teachings, which emphasize the importance of engaging in activities that promote justice, peace, and the common good. However, the church also recognizes the potential

⁷ Oppong, Adesegun and Manu, “SDA Mission in Southern Ghana Union Conference,” 93.

⁸ Jacques B. Doukhan, *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2004), 45-46.

⁹ Corwin E. Smidt, and Lyman A. Kellstedt, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 112-113.

conflicts that can arise between religious observance and civic responsibilities. In addressing these conflicts, the SDA Church has provided guidelines to help members navigate such dilemmas. For instance, the church advises members to participate in early voting or absentee voting when possible, to avoid compromising their Sabbath observance.¹⁰ This approach underscores the church's commitment to balancing religious devotion with civic engagement, encouraging members to fulfill their civic duties without violating their religious principles.

2.4 History of Sabbath Voting in Ghana

The colonial government exercised a major role in modeling the electoral systems in Ghana. According to Daniel Boadu, the introduction of structured electoral processes during the colonial era laid the foundation for the modern democratic system in Ghana. Conversely, these systems often did not take into account the religious practices of many communities, including the SDAs.¹¹ Again, the administrative frameworks of the British establishment encompassed weekend events and programs.¹² After independence, Ghana retained this practice as elections were often held on weekends to maximize voter audience.¹³ However, this created a conflict for SDA members who, observing their religious beliefs, abstain from secular activities on Saturdays.¹⁴

The period between 1982 and 1992 was particularly significant in Ghana's political history, as it marked the country's transition from military rule to democratic governance. During this time, several electoral reforms were introduced to ensure free and fair elections. However, these reforms overlooked the religious sensitivities of minority groups such as the SDAs.¹⁵ In 1996, Ghana had its first national election on Saturday, the Sabbath of the SDAs. During the period, some Adventists in Ghana sought legal alternative to change the election date, with the argument that it infringed on their religious rights.¹⁶ Although the courts did not rule in their favor, the case brought significant attention to the issue and sparked discussions about electoral reforms.¹⁷ Since then, there has been an emergent negotiation between religious leaders and government officials aimed at finding commonly acceptable solutions.

For Gyampo, the introduction of the biometric voter registration in 2012 was to allow more flexibility in voting schedules.¹⁸ Asante sees this advancement as a progressive step towards addressing the SDA community's concerns in the sense that it will provide a framework for potentially more inclusive voting practices in Ghana.¹⁹ The 2020 elections saw increased advocacy from religious groups for alternative voting arrangements, and there were calls for the implementation of more healthy early voting systems.²⁰ Additionally, according to Kusi, the SDA Church has been proactive in engaging with the Electoral Commission to ensure that their members can participate in future elections without violating their Sabbath observance.²¹ Nevertheless, Ghana's second Sabbath voting

¹⁰ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 18th ed. (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010), 78-79.

¹¹ Daniel Boadu, "Colonial Administration and the Evolution of Electoral Systems in Ghana," *Ghana Historical Journal* 7(3) (2001), 118-135, 118.

¹² Boadu, "Colonial Administration and the Evolution of Electoral Systems in Ghana," 118.

¹³ Mike Oquaye, *Politics in Ghana: 1982-1992* (Accra: Tornado Publications, 2004), 132.

¹⁴ Akenten M. Owusu, "The Impact of Religious Beliefs on Electoral Participation in Ghana," *Sociology of Religion in Africa*, 3(1) (2010), 34-45, 34.

¹⁵ Oquaye, *Politics in Ghana: 1982-1992*, 132.

¹⁶ Joseph Adjei, *Electoral challenges and religious rights in Ghana* (Accra: Ghana University Press, 2003), 34.

¹⁷ Adjei, *Electoral challenges and religious rights in Ghana*, 34.

¹⁸ Richard Edward Van Gyampo, *The electoral Reforms in Ghana: A Critical Assessment* (Accra: Ghana University Press, 2017), 89.

¹⁹ Richard Asante, "Biometric Voter Registration and Electoral Reform in Ghana," *African Studies Review*, 59(1) (2016), 69-93, 69.

²⁰ Ransford Edward Van Gyampo, "The State of Electoral Reforms in Ghana," *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2017): 95-109., 95.

²¹ David Kusi, "The Role of Religious Institutions in Ghanaian Elections," *Journal of African Political Studies*, 14(3) (2021), 201-218, 202.

is bound to happen in December 7, 2024. This has raised concerns and discussions in the SDA church community in Ghana.

2.5 SDA Church's Position on Sabbath Voting in Ghana

Historically, the SDA Church in Ghana has been vocal about issues affecting its members, such as Sabbath observance and religious freedoms. The Church's position often reflects a balance between maintaining its religious principles and engaging with national governance.²² On July 20, 2024, the two SDA unions in Ghana—the Southern Ghana Union Conference and the Northern Ghana Union Conference—issued a joint communiqué addressing recent developments affecting the Church's position in the country. This communiqué is a pivotal document that outlines the Church's stance on Sabbath voting and efforts made to change the story.

The communiqué whilst recognizing the civic responsibility of its members to participate in the democratic process by voting, retold the Church's longstanding position that Sabbath voting is contrary to the SDA Church's understanding of the Sabbath sanctity.²³ It explained “The Sabbath, observed from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, holds deep spiritual significance for Adventists. It is a day dedicated to worship, rest, and communion with God.”²⁴ The communiqué further expressed that “The leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has consistently advocated an election date change to accommodate members' religious observance.”²⁵ It, therefore, called for more consideration of religious practices in the scheduling of national activities to accommodate the Sabbath.²⁶ The communiqué concluded that “the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ghana respects the rights of its members to vote. However, on the matter of voting on Saturday, we urge members to prayerfully ensure that their decisions are consistent with the Adventist belief on the sanctity of the Sabbath.”²⁷ The communiqué issued by the two SDA unions highlights the Church's commitment to addressing key issues affecting its members and its readiness to participate in dialogue with national authorities.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a structured survey questionnaire to examine Ghanaian Seventh-day Adventists' views on voting on the Sabbath. The survey assessed perceptions of civic duties in relation to religious observance and explored possible electoral accommodations for Sabbath-keepers. The questionnaire combined closed-ended questions for statistical analysis of voting behavior and open-ended questions to capture qualitative insights. A purposive sampling method targeted Adventists across various demographics, gathering responses from 670 participants of different ages, genders, church roles, and educational backgrounds.

Data collection occurred online, ensuring accessibility and broad participation. The survey covered:

- Demographics (age, gender, church position, education).
- Religious Commitment (Sabbath observance, church attendance).
- Civic Engagement (voting history, Sabbath voting experiences).
- Perceived Impact (faith, salvation, conflicts).
- Alternative Solutions (early or absentee voting).

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to identify trends, concerns, and policy considerations for inclusive elections.

²² Kwame Boateng, *The Sabbath and civic duty: An Adventist perspective* (Accra: Adventist Press, 2017), 72.

²³ Thomas Techie Ocran and Kwame Annor Boahen, “Sabbath Observance and Civic Responsibility: A Statement from the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ghana,” *Communiqué*, July 20, 2024.

²⁴ Nii Adjei Mensah, “SDAs Not Voting On Dec 7,” *Daily Graphic*, July 22, 2024.

²⁵ Thomas Techie Ocran and Kwame Annor Boahen, “Sabbath Observance and Civic Responsibility: A Statement from the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ghana,” *Communiqué*, July 20, 2024.

²⁶ Ocran and Boahen, “Sabbath Observance and Civic Responsibility: A Statement from the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ghana.”

²⁷ Ocran and Boahen, “Sabbath Observance and Civic Responsibility: A Statement from the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ghana.”

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Analysis of Data

4.1.1 Demographics and Religious Commitment

The survey data indicates that the majority of respondents fall within the 26-35 age group, representing 277 individuals. This is closely followed by those in the 36-45 age category, with 201 participants. The dominance of these age groups suggests that a large proportion of the respondents are within their most active years of civic participation and religious commitment. In terms of gender distribution, there is a significant disparity, with male respondents (555 individuals) far outnumbering female respondents (115 individuals). This gender imbalance might suggest that more males were available or willing to participate in the survey, or it could reflect broader trends in Adventist civic engagement. Education levels among respondents are notably high, with the majority (359 individuals) holding a Bachelor's degree, while 152 respondents hold postgraduate degrees. This indicates that the respondents are largely well-educated, which could influence their perspectives on civic duties, religious obligations, and the intersection between faith and governance.

A particularly striking finding is the importance of Sabbath observance among respondents. An overwhelming 624 individuals indicated that Sabbath observance is very important to them, underscoring a deep commitment to religious practice. This strong adherence to Sabbath principles is likely to influence their attitudes towards voting on the Sabbath and civic participation in general.

4.1.2 Perceptions of Voting and Civic Engagement

Ghanaian Adventists generally recognize the significance of participating in national elections and fulfilling their civic responsibilities. This is evident in the fact that 553 respondents (83%) stated that it is important to engage in civic duties such as voting. This statistic highlights a sense of national responsibility and awareness of the role of voting in shaping governance and societal development. However, despite their acknowledgment of civic duty, a considerable number of respondents expressed concerns about the potential conflict between voting and their faith. Three hundred and fifty-seven (357) respondents strongly agreed and hundred and one (101) agreed that voting on the Sabbath could be seen as compromising their faith. This suggests that a significant portion of Ghanaian Adventists struggle with balancing their religious principles with their role as active citizens.

Additionally, the concern about the spiritual implications of Sabbath voting is evident in the responses regarding salvation. It was observed that 341 respondents believe that voting on the Sabbath could impact one's salvation, while 238 individuals disagreed with this perspective. These responses indicate that while some Adventists view Sabbath voting as a serious spiritual issue, others may see it as a matter of personal conviction rather than a direct determinant of salvation.

4.1.3 Voting Behavior and Experiences

One of the critical areas of investigation was whether respondents had ever faced a situation where voting coincided with the Sabbath. It was seen that 140 respondents (21%) reported having encountered this challenge. This means that a significant number of Adventists have had to make a decision regarding whether to vote on the Sabbath or abstain from participating in elections on religious grounds.

Among those who experienced Sabbath voting conflicts, 61 individuals chose to vote despite the religious implications, while 238 individuals refrained from voting. Interestingly, 206 respondents marked "Not applicable," possibly indicating that they had never encountered such a situation. This data suggests that, when faced with the dilemma, a majority of Adventists opt to uphold their Sabbath observance rather than participate in the electoral process.

The moral and theological justification of Sabbath voting was another point of interest. When asked whether voting on the Sabbath could be justified under certain circumstances, 383 respondents disagreed, suggesting a strong opposition to any form of Sabbath voting. However, 190 respondents

believed that Sabbath voting could be justified, indicating that a segment of the Adventist population is open to situational flexibility on this issue.

4.1.4 Suggested Alternatives for Sabbath Voting

Given the challenges that Sabbath voting presents, respondents proposed several alternatives that could help Adventists participate in elections without violating their religious principles. The most favored alternative is early voting, supported by 242 respondents. This suggests that a significant portion of Adventists believe that governments should implement early voting options to accommodate religious minorities who cannot vote on Saturdays.

Another widely supported alternative is postponing voting to a non-Sabbath day, preferred by 209 respondents. This proposal reflects the desire for systemic changes that would allow Adventists to fully engage in their civic duties without religious conflicts. Additionally, 111 respondents suggested absentee voting, which would allow Adventists to vote remotely or before Election Day. This option aligns with global best practices for accommodating religious groups and ensuring inclusivity in electoral processes.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

4.2.1 Religious Commitment vs. Civic Duty

The commitment of Ghanaian Seventh-day Adventists to Sabbath observance, even when it conflicts with civic duties such as voting, reflects a profound dedication to their faith and an enduring loyalty to the fourth commandment. This religious prioritization raises critical questions about the dynamic interplay between religious convictions and civic responsibilities, especially within the broader theological and constitutional frameworks in democratic societies. For Adventists, the Sabbath is not merely a tradition but a divine ordinance embedded in the Decalogue (Exodus 20:8–11), and thus non-negotiable in its observance.

The Apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, offers a theological rationale for Christian engagement with civil authority: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Romans 13:1 ESV). This text provides a foundational principle in Christian political theology—that governmental structures possess divine legitimacy. However, Paul’s broader theological context does not suggest blind obedience; rather, it assumes that civil obedience operates under the larger umbrella of divine sovereignty.

Indeed, when civil directives directly contradict divine law, Scripture offers numerous precedents for prioritizing God’s commandments. The apostles, when confronted by the Sanhedrin and forbidden to preach in the name of Jesus, declared unambiguously, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).²⁸ This apostolic stance has become a theological touchstone for conscientious objection rooted in faith convictions. The early church did not interpret submission to earthly rulers as a call to spiritual compromise.

The situation faced by Ghanaian Seventh-day Adventists thus mirrors this ancient biblical tension. Their refusal to engage in civic duties such as voting on the Sabbath is not born out of political apathy or civic irresponsibility but from a conscientious effort to honor divine instruction. For them, participation in electoral processes on the seventh day, especially when voting is scheduled on a Saturday, constitutes a violation of sacred time set apart for worship and rest.

Notably, Seventh-day Adventist theology upholds both civic engagement and Sabbath sanctity. Ellen G. White, a co-founder of the denomination, encouraged responsible citizenship and respect for law, but always within the framework of obedience to God.²⁹ Thus, when state and church mandates

²⁸ See also The Providence Foundation, *Biblical Principles of Government* (Charlottesville, VA: The Providence Foundation, 2003), 34–36.

²⁹ Ellen G. White, *Counsels for the Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1991), 261–263.

collide, Adventists assert their allegiance to the higher law. This is not a withdrawal from society but a protest against structures that compel religious compromise.

This conscientious abstention from voting on the Sabbath highlights the need for inclusive democratic processes that respect religious diversity. Scholars such as Nicholas Wolterstorff have argued that liberal democracies must make space for “the voice of the religious conscience” in public life.³⁰ From a constitutional perspective, the Ghanaian legal system also protects religious freedom, suggesting that adjustments to voting schedules or provisions for early voting could enhance democratic inclusivity without forcing citizens to choose between faith and national duty.

Furthermore, this scenario invites deeper theological reflection on the nature of Christian citizenship. Augustine’s distinction between the *civitas Dei* (City of God) and the *civitas terrena* (earthly city) continues to offer a relevant framework for analyzing the Christian’s dual identity.³¹ While believers are called to participate in the affairs of the earthly city, their ultimate loyalty belongs to the kingdom of God.

Thus, the Ghanaian Adventist commitment to Sabbath observance, even in the face of civic obligations like voting, is a compelling demonstration of religious fidelity. Rather than undermining democratic ideals, it calls for electoral systems to honor the constitutional and theological principles of conscience and religious liberty. An inclusive democracy must ensure that no citizen is disenfranchised on account of their faith.

4.2.2 Low Sabbath Voting Rates

Even in situations where elections are scheduled on the Sabbath, the overwhelming majority of Seventh-day Adventists deliberately choose not to participate in the voting process. This decision is deeply rooted in their unwavering commitment to the biblical commandment to “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exod. 20:8). Adventist interpretation of Sabbath observance extends beyond rest to include abstaining from secular engagements such as commerce, labor, and political activities, including voting.³² For many Adventists, the sanctity of the Sabbath is non-negotiable and takes precedence over civic duties, even when elections involve critical national decisions that could significantly impact their lives and communities.

This strong adherence is corroborated by studies and denominational guidelines that discourage participation in secular engagements on the Sabbath. According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, members are encouraged to “refrain from secular activities and political involvement” on the Sabbath in order to honor God.³³ In a study conducted by Joseph Mensah and Kwabena Osei-Tutu on religious behavior among Ghanaian Adventists, it was revealed that 82% of respondents considered voting on the Sabbath as an unacceptable breach of Sabbath observance.³⁴ This is consistent with the global Adventist ethos that emphasizes spiritual devotion over civic activity on the Sabbath.

The reluctance to vote on the Sabbath highlights a fundamental conflict between religious observance and civic duty, reinforcing the idea that many Adventists do not view voting as compatible with Sabbath principles. This dilemma places believers in a moral quandary, as they are forced to choose between their faith and their democratic right to vote. For example, in Ghana, general elections are typically scheduled on Saturdays, effectively disenfranchising a portion of the population that wishes to both honor their faith and participate in national governance.

³⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 105–108.

³¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), XIX.17.

³² Francis D. Nichol, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1953), 603.

³³ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Secretariat of the General Conference, 2015), 146.

³⁴ Joseph Mensah and Kwabena Osei-Tutu, “Religious Practice and Political Participation Among Adventists in Ghana,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 22 (2020), 85–102, 86.

This tension has broader implications. As sociologist Kofi Amoah argues, "the marginalization of religious minorities in the electoral process undermines both religious liberty and democratic inclusivity."³⁵ Consequently, many Adventists feel politically sidelined, not due to a lack of patriotism or interest in governance, but because the electoral system does not accommodate their religious convictions.

Given this reality, it is essential for electoral bodies and policymakers to explore inclusive electoral arrangements that enable Adventists and other Sabbath-keepers to vote without compromising their faith. In jurisdictions such as the United States and Canada, early and absentee voting options have been effective in ensuring broader participation, including among religious minorities.³⁶ These alternatives can serve as models for other nations with large Adventist populations, such as Ghana, Kenya, and Papua New Guinea, where Saturday elections have been particularly contentious.

Practical solutions could include early voting, postal voting, digital ballot systems, or the rescheduling of elections to accommodate religious observance. Such reforms would uphold constitutional protections on freedom of religion while simultaneously strengthening democratic institutions by promoting equal participation. As legal scholar Nana Ama Busia puts it, "True democracy does not merely permit voting; it ensures that every citizen is given a fair and reasonable opportunity to vote."³⁷

Ultimately, ensuring that no citizen is disenfranchised due to their faith strengthens the democratic process and upholds the principles of equal representation and participation for all. Respecting religious diversity in electoral scheduling is not merely a concession to a minority but a reinforcement of core democratic values.

4.2.3 Need for Alternatives

The survey responses underscore a widespread and deeply held support for electoral reforms that accommodate the religious convictions of Seventh-day Adventists and other Sabbath-keeping communities. A significant majority of respondents perceive the current electoral framework in Ghana—where elections are frequently scheduled on Saturdays—as inadvertently discriminatory, compelling Sabbath-keepers to choose between their religious commitment and their civic responsibility.³⁸ This tension not only poses a moral and spiritual dilemma but also raises constitutional and human rights concerns, especially regarding the right to freely practice one's religion without interference.³⁹

One of the most prominent proposals emerging from the survey is the implementation of early voting. This approach would allow registered voters to cast their ballots prior to the official Election Day, thus offering Sabbath-keepers the flexibility to participate fully in the democratic process without violating the sanctity of the Sabbath.⁴⁰ Early voting is not merely a logistical adjustment; it is a tangible expression of the democratic principle of inclusivity.⁴⁰ Scholars such as John Witte Jr. have long argued that religious liberty must be balanced with civic expectations in pluralistic societies, and policies like early voting can serve as that bridge.⁴¹

In addition to early voting, many respondents advocate rescheduling elections to non-Sabbath days, such as midweek public holidays. This recommendation resonates with the broader ethos of

³⁵ Kofi Amoah, *Faith, Citizenship, and Politics in Ghana* (Accra: Sankofa Press, 2018), 111.

³⁶ Pew Research Center, "Religious Groups and Voting in the U.S.," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, November 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion>.

³⁷ Nana Ama Busia, "Faith and Democratic Rights: Legal Perspectives on Religion and Elections," *Ghana Law Review* 12, no. 1 (2019), 93-115, 94.

³⁸ Kwabena Asare, *Religious Freedom and Electoral Practices in Ghana* (Accra: Freedom Press, 2020), 112.

³⁹ Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, 1992, Article 21(1)(c).

⁴⁰ Benjamin Mensah, "Religious Observance and Voter Participation in Ghana," *Journal of Democracy in Africa* 8, no. 2 (2021), 77-89.

⁴¹ Emily Snyder, *Designing Inclusive Democracies* (London: Routledge, 2019), 53-55.

religious accommodation found in democratic societies.⁴² In Ghana's multi-religious context, where both Christian and Muslim holy days are observed, electoral bodies are encouraged to design schedules that do not disadvantage any group.⁴³ Doing so would not only uphold the spirit of Article 21(1)(c) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, which guarantees freedom of religion, but would also reflect international best practices in ensuring equal political participation.⁴⁴

A third reform frequently suggested is the adoption of absentee or remote voting systems. This may include secure mail-in ballots, electronic voting, or special voting days for individuals with religious or occupational restrictions.⁴⁵ Remote voting has been successfully implemented in several democracies and is increasingly seen as essential to overcoming disenfranchisement linked to religious observance, disability, or distance.⁴⁶ For Seventh-day Adventists, whose theology upholds strict Sabbath observance from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset, the availability of remote voting methods would ensure their full inclusion in civic life without compromising their theological commitments.⁴⁷

Collectively, these electoral reforms—early voting, election rescheduling, and absentee voting—point toward a more inclusive and participatory democracy. They ensure that no citizen is placed in the untenable position of having to choose between faith and citizenship.⁴⁸ As legal scholar Michael McConnell has observed, the hallmark of a just society is not uniformity, but the capacity to make room for genuine difference.⁴⁹ By embracing reforms that respect religious convictions, electoral authorities in Ghana and beyond would be taking a principled step toward safeguarding both democratic integrity and religious liberty.

5.0 PERCEIVED IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ADVENTIST COMMUNITY AND THE BROADER SOCIETY

The challenges associated with Sabbath voting have far-reaching implications for both the Adventist community and the broader Ghanaian society. Within the Adventist community, the reluctance to vote on the Sabbath reinforces a collective identity deeply rooted in religious convictions. Scholars have highlighted the role of religious observance in shaping group identity and cohesion.⁵⁰ For Adventists, Sabbath observance is a core tenet of faith, and adherence to this practice often takes precedence over civic responsibilities.⁵¹ However, this strong commitment to religious principles may come at a cost, particularly in the realm of political engagement. If Adventists consistently abstain from voting due to Sabbath constraints, their political representation and influence may diminish, thereby limiting their ability to advocate policies that align with their values and interests.⁵² This phenomenon aligns with

⁴² John Witte Jr., *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2005), 182–185.

⁴³ Samuel Kofi Boateng Nkrumah-Pobi, Emmanuel Effah Amankwah, and Benedict Kofi Quay Obinim, "Pentecostals and Voting Behaviour in Ghana's 2024 Presidential Elections," *PJTM* 5(1) (2024), 80-96, 81.

⁴⁴ Constitution of Ghana, Article 21; see also United Nations Human Rights Council, *General Comment No. 22* on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (1993).

⁴⁵ Nana Adu Boahen, "Religion and Electoral Rights in Ghana," *African Journal of Public Law* 22, no. 1 (2020), 102-122, 102.

⁴⁶ Grace Nkansah, "Absentee Voting and Democratic Inclusion in Ghana," *West African Political Studies* 5, no. 1 (2022), 34–36, 34.

⁴⁷ Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 233.

⁴⁸ David Elkins, "Voting by Mail and Democratic Participation," *Election Law Journal* 11, no. 2 (2020), 143-155, 144.

⁴⁹ Michael W. McConnell, "Accommodation of Religion," *The Supreme Court Review* 1985 (1985), 1–59.

⁵⁰ Pew Research Center, "Religion and Public Life," Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2016, accessed on November 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/>.

⁵¹ Knight, George R, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2008), 45.

⁵² Roger L. Dudley and Edwin I. Hernandez, *Citizens of Two Worlds: Religion and Politics among American Seventh-day Adventists* (Institute of Church Ministry, Andrews University, 1992), 45.

broader research on the intersection of religion and political participation, which suggests that religious restrictions can sometimes serve as a barrier to civic engagement.⁵³

Beyond the Adventist community, the inability of a segment of the population to vote due to religious constraints raises concerns about electoral inclusivity and fairness. Democratic principles emphasize equal participation for all citizens, yet when a religious group is systematically disadvantaged in the voting process, it may undermine the legitimacy of election outcomes.⁵⁴ If a significant number of Adventists refrain from voting, the electoral results may not fully capture the will of the entire populace, potentially skewing political representation. This aligns with studies on religious minorities and voting behavior, which highlight how structural barriers can lead to political marginalization.⁵⁵

Furthermore, the issue of Sabbath voting underscores the broader need for policy adjustments that accommodate diverse religious practices while maintaining electoral integrity. Some countries have adopted measures such as early voting, mail-in ballots, or alternative voting days to enhance inclusivity for religious groups.⁵⁶ Ghana's electoral system could consider similar accommodations to ensure that all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, have an equal opportunity to participate in the democratic process. By implementing policies that recognize religious diversity, the state can foster a more inclusive and representative governance structure, strengthening democratic legitimacy.⁵⁷

To sum up, the implications of Sabbath voting challenges extend beyond the Adventist community, affecting the broader democratic landscape in Ghana. While Adventists' commitment to Sabbath observance reinforces their religious identity, it may also limit their political influence. At the national level, the exclusion of a religious minority from electoral participation raises concerns about fairness and representation. Addressing these challenges through policy reforms can contribute to a more inclusive and participatory democracy that respects both civic duties and religious freedoms.

6.0 THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The survey reveals a profound concern among Ghanaian Seventh-day Adventists regarding the scheduling of national elections on the Sabbath. This concern is deeply rooted in their theological understanding of the Sabbath as a sacred time set apart by God for worship, rest, and spiritual reflection (Exod. 20:8–11). For Adventists, Sabbath observance is not merely a religious tradition but a divine commandment that affirms God's sovereignty and their covenantal relationship with Him. Thus, any civic activity, including voting, that competes with Sabbath sanctity is viewed as a potential compromise of faith.

The tension between civic responsibility and religious obligation is not new in Christian theology. Jesus' teaching to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21, ESV) offers a foundational principle for navigating such conflicts. However, this passage also implies that God's claims take precedence when the demands of the state intrude upon divine commandments. This aligns with Peter's assertion before the Sanhedrin: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). These biblical texts reinforce the Adventist stance that the Sabbath must remain inviolate, even in the face of civic pressures.

The data indicates that a significant majority of respondents believe voting on the Sabbath may compromise one's faith and even jeopardize salvation. This sentiment underscores a theological conviction that the Sabbath is a sign of loyalty to God (Ezek. 20:12) and that participating in secular

⁵³ Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 243.

⁵⁴ Lijphart, Arend. "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma." *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 1 (1997), 1–14, 2.

⁵⁵ Fox, Jonathan. *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State: A Time Series Analysis of Worldwide Data* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 101.

⁵⁶ Elkins, Zachary, and John Sides. "Reforming Electoral Systems: A Global Perspective." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007), 149–163.

⁵⁷ Norris Pippa, *Why Electoral Integrity Matters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 125.

activities such as voting detracts from the holiness of the day. Consequently, the call for electoral reforms—including early voting, absentee voting, and rescheduling elections—is not a mere logistical preference but a plea to protect religious liberty and uphold theological integrity.⁵⁸

The Adventist understanding of religious liberty also plays a critical role in this discussion. Ellen G. White, a co-founder of the Adventist Church, emphasized the sacredness of conscience and the importance of resisting state coercion in matters of faith.⁵⁹ From this perspective, forcing Sabbath-keepers to vote on Saturday violates their conscience and undermines their freedom of worship. Therefore, the advocacy for inclusive electoral systems is not only a civic appeal but a prophetic witness to justice and equity.

Moreover, the survey responses reflect a desire for collective action and ecclesial support. Many believe that church leadership should not leave the issue of Sabbath voting to individual discretion but should speak with moral clarity and theological consistency. This aligns with the biblical model of communal responsibility seen in ancient Israel, where leaders upheld and protected the covenantal values of the nation (Deut. 17:9–13).

In light of these theological insights, it becomes evident that electoral systems must accommodate the sacred rhythms of religious communities. As Paul writes, “Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind” regarding days of observance (Rom. 14:5), but this liberty must be respected by society. Implementing reforms such as early voting, absentee ballots, and rescheduling elections would affirm both the democratic principle of inclusivity and the divine principle of Sabbath sanctity.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the survey, several recommendations can be made to ensure a more inclusive and equitable electoral process in Ghana—one that acknowledges the religious convictions of Seventh-day Adventists and other Sabbath-keeping communities. First, the implementation of early voting policies is essential. This was the most favored alternative among survey respondents, with 242 individuals supporting it. The Electoral Commission of Ghana should establish official early voting periods, preferably during weekdays, to enable citizens to vote before the Sabbath begins. Such a measure would provide much-needed flexibility, allowing Sabbath-keepers to participate in national elections without compromising their religious commitments. This adjustment would ensure that religious observance and civic responsibility are not placed in opposition.

Secondly, there is a clear call to reschedule general elections to non-Sabbath days. The current practice of holding elections on Saturdays poses a significant barrier to participation for many Sabbath-keepers. Therefore, government and electoral bodies should consider shifting elections to public holidays, which would be more inclusive. Recognizing Ghana's religious diversity in this way would uphold the constitutional principles of religious freedom and equitable participation in democratic governance.

Thirdly, the introduction of absentee or remote voting options should be considered. Although not the top choice, absentee voting was supported by 111 respondents and is seen as a viable alternative. The Electoral Commission could explore secure options such as mail-in ballots, electronic voting platforms, or designated early polling centers for religious minorities. These approaches are consistent with global democratic practices and would ensure that religious obligations do not become a barrier to full civic participation.

In addition, civic education campaigns that address the intersection of religion and democracy are vital. The survey revealed theological differences among Adventists regarding Sabbath voting. While some view it as compromising their faith, others are more flexible. To address this divide,

⁵⁸ Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, 19th ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Secretariat of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2022), 140–143.

⁵⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 564.

partnerships should be formed with religious leaders, theologians, and civil society organizations to promote public dialogue and education. Such efforts would help individuals navigate their responsibilities as both citizens and believers, reducing internal conflicts and promoting informed participation.

Moreover, religious communities must be recognized and engaged in electoral planning. Given the moral and theological weight that Sabbath voting carries for many Adventists, their perspectives should be included in national discussions about electoral reforms. Representatives from Sabbath-keeping groups should be invited to serve on electoral advisory committees and policy consultations. Their inclusion will ensure that electoral policies are reflective of the full religious spectrum in Ghana and help foster trust in the democratic system.

Not only the above, but it is also crucial to monitor and document instances of religious disenfranchisement. The fact that 238 respondents chose not to vote due to Sabbath conflicts underscores the need for empirical tracking of such challenges. The Electoral Commission should regularly collect and analyze data on voter turnout among religious minorities, particularly in elections scheduled on Saturdays. This data will be instrumental in crafting policies that uphold the right to vote for all citizens, regardless of religious background.

Finally, there is a need to promote interfaith advocacy for electoral reform. Seventh-day Adventists are not alone in their Sabbath observance. Other groups, such as the Church of God (Seventh Day) and Jewish communities, share similar concerns. Collaborative advocacy efforts among these faith communities can have a more substantial impact on policymakers. A united front calling for inclusive reforms sends a powerful message about the importance of accommodating religious diversity in national democratic processes. These recommendations, if adopted, would help ensure that Ghana's electoral system is both fair and respectful of the country's diverse religious convictions, particularly for Sabbath-keeping citizens.

8.0 CONCLUSION

Ghanaian Seventh-day Adventists face a dilemma between their faith and civic duties, as their Sabbath observance from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset prohibits secular activities, including voting. When national elections fall on Saturdays, many Adventists abstain, prioritizing religious convictions over democratic participation. This leads to concerns about political disenfranchisement and exclusion from the electoral process. While a small number of Adventists consider Sabbath voting acceptable under specific circumstances, such as national emergencies or moral obligations, the majority strongly oppose it. This highlights the need for electoral reforms that respect religious freedoms while ensuring inclusive civic participation. To address this, electoral bodies should consider options like early or absentee voting, or scheduling elections on non-Sabbath days. Public awareness campaigns and interfaith dialogues can also promote understanding of religious diversity in voting processes. Ultimately, adopting inclusive policies will uphold both religious liberty and democratic engagement, ensuring no Ghanaian is forced to choose between faith and civic duty.

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