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CARD READER, VOTERS CONFIDENCE AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: A STUDY OF THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Generally, the history of election in Nigeria have been characterized by so many electoral malpractices, challenges and problems thereby making such elections very unpopular. In line with this, many Nigerians builds impression that electoral malpractice cannot be eradicated in the country. These maladies usually occur as a result of government negligence in the implementation of its good policies into reality. This has paved the way for the elected offices to continue in power which intentionally create difficulties to the incumbent parties. While to others, they view it from the aspect of politicians who threatens the electoral officials to perpetrate so many illegalities during election period to manipulate the results. It is against this background that many policies were been executed by different governments with respect to the electoral bodies yet the situation remain as it is with so many irregularities. Nevertheless, the introduction of electronic machine (card reader) in the election process has proven a success in reducing so many malpractices at the election venues. This change has generally increased the level of public confidence and turnout. Hence, electorates now can have the feelings that they will participate without fear of their votes. This paper therefore intends to emphasize the use of voter's card reader in the forthcoming elections. Moreover, the paper advices the government to minimize the problems encountered with card reader in the past election as a lesson. If this can uphold, the people will have confidence in the democracy as a system. This research concentrates on the analyses based on the qualitative technique as its method of explanation.

KEY WORDS:

Card reader, Public confidence, Participation and Elections

Introduction

The 2015 general election was the fifth general election since Nigeria's resumed from military to democratic rule in 1999. Nigerians went into general the elections with new determination to exercise their voting rights and stood earnestly to monitor and defend their votes with greatest concern (Momodu 2015). Although, this 2015 general election has already passed, the election was bedeviled with variousquestions that almost deprived Nigerians their opportunity of voting for their representatives in the governance (Momodu 2015). Also, these problems

almost affected the integrity, quality and management of the election. Thus, if the citizenry does not believe in the justice, truth, sincerity, and basic integrity of election process, the very foundation of any autonomous society might be endangered. This implies that public faith in the integrity of election system is a basis of democratic government (Alvarez and Hall, 2008).

Prior to the 2015 general elections, some technical based reforms (e.g. biometric records of voters, advanced finger prints documents systems etc.) were embarked upon by the Nigerian government under the new leadership of the Independent electoral Commission (INEC) headed by Professor Attahiru Jega. A card reader is amicro electronic device that reads a magnetic band or barcode on a card, which transfers data from various transferable memory storing cards (Identification cards ISO/IEC.7816-13 2006). Yet, there are so many card readers which include memory card reader, voter's card reader, excess control card reader, business card reader, etc. but it was the biometric technology/voter's card reader that was used at the2015 General Election (The Punch News dated 29th March, 2015).

In addition, the institutionalization of the voter card reader in the 2015 General Election in Nigeria's has instilled some degree of credibility and transparency into the Nigeria's electoral system (Okonji, 2015). It was generally observed that when the Independent National Electoral Commission first publicized its strategy to introduce the voter's card reader device for the March, 28th and the April, 11th 2015 general elections, several Nigerians, particularly politicians strongly opposed to it. They felt that a country like Nigeria has not developed to such level where technological tools can be employed into its elections. On the contrary, many technological specialists in Nigeria and even outside who observed the election commended the commission for insisting on the usage of voter's card reader machines (The Vanguard, 2015). Finally, the main objective of this paper is to see whether the use of voter's card reader has increased the level of public confidence and participation among Nigerians.

Conceptual Clarification Card Reader

Card reader is a machine that is used to examine the information of Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) in order to ascertain the identity of a voter in a particular polling unit. It is one of the highest inventions of biometric authentication technology that has been a controversial, vital and critical component of the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria. The voter card reader was intended explicitly for the certification process and verification of qualified voters before voting (Momodu, 2015).

Public Confidence

Public confidence in a democratic process is the key part of sovereign legitimacy (R. Michael, Alvarez, Hall, & Llewellyn, 2007) A genuine election is ultimately one in which the outcome reflects the freely expressed choices of the people. Whether an election and its outcomes enjoy credibility in the eyes of the country's citizens whether it has achieved its function of giving voice to the will of the people will depend on the extent to which the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality as well as other international obligations are respected, and on the extent to which the election is professional, impartial, accurate and transparent in all stages of its administration (Maarten, 2015).

Recent reports of the UN Secretary-General to the General Assembly also noted that an inquiry into confidence building in elections would involve looking beyond the rules and conduct of an election itself, and considering how the electoral stakes are affected by the broader political system and culture of a country. Other practitioners, too, have highlighted public confidence, in addition to technical improvements and respect for citizens' rights, as an important pursuit of electoral administrations, observers, and assistance providers. Members of the international community have made the notion of trust a feature of their engagement with national actors (Maarten H. 2015).In this study, public confidence means a situation in which there was a massive turnout of voters during elections. Hence, it burst their confident because the voters now believes that electoral malpractice has reduced as a result of the introduction of electronic voting in Nigeria.

Participation

Public participation can be seen as the involvement of the public or citizens of a given country in governing the affairs of such country. People do participate by persuading, openly or indirectly, the structure of government, the plans they make, and the kind of practices they establish. Normally, election is the major system of civil participation. However, involvement in the politics also comprises of many other ways in which voters attempt to influence the decisions of government (Nie, H. &Verba, S. 1975). For the purpose of this paper, participation can be seen as a process where the citizens engage themselves in politics by coming out to participate fully in the elections due to some modifications in the electoral system.

Elections

Elections can be seen as an integral system of a democratic process which enables the citizens to freely and fairly determine who should govern them at various

levels of government. They still possess such constitutional powers to recall an elected representative. According to Dye (2001), elections are the major tools for recruitment of leaders in democratic societies. It is also a process of electing leaders into power in a given country through the method of eligibility (Nigerian Constitution, 1999).

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework supports a research in its relevant viewpoint, thereby directing on what to search for and the standard to analyze the basis of the research. Thus, for the purpose of this study, it is anchored on the structural functionalist theory as the framework for the study. According to Varma (1975), structural functional analysis operates around certain concepts like functions and structures. The structural functional analysis is built on three basic questions i.e. (i) What basic functions are fulfilled in any given system?, (ii) By what structures? and (iii) under what conditions?

In the words of Merton (1949), "functions are those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system; and dysfunction, those observed consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system". Varma (1975) further notes that beside the concept of function, another very important concept in structural functional analysis is that of structure. While function deals with the consequences, involving objectives as well as processes of pattern of actions, structure refers to those arrangements within the system which perform the functions. A single function may be fulfilled by a complex combination of structures, just as any given structural arrangement may perform functions which might have different kinds of consequences for the structure (Varma, 1975).

From the above, Structural functionalism is employed as a theoretical framework so that some possible ways of survival of a system can be provided. The analysis is primarily directed towards the amount of change at the fundamental level. To apply this theory in the analysis of a given political system, it is imperative to note that a political system has many structures that perform certain functions to make the system work. Therefore, Nigeria operates a political system and for the society to maintain itself, certain institutions also known as structures are created to perform certain roles or functions for the maintenance of the Nigerian society. At this instant, for the electoral process to function well, there is need to have an institution and that institution in the case of Nigeria is the Independent National Electoral Commission which performs the functions of conducting elections into the various elective offices (Severus, 2007).

In this study, the paper appraised the 2015 General Elections administered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the establishment of electronic voting in to the Nigeria's electoral process. Further more, in the course of performing their different roles, some intended or unintended consequences manifested which improved or lessened the adaptation of the system thereby bringing about dysfunction in the system. These consequences as well as the dysfunctions according to the above theory were analyzed in this research to know whether there is an increased in the public confidence and the level of participation of the voters.

The Card Reader and its Impacts in the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

Despite the problems that challenged the operation of some card readers in the 2015 General Elections, a substantial outcome of the device usage was witnessed after the polls. Firstly, the use of the voter's card reader has led to the increase and strengthening of the public confidence and belief in the election process. This public confidence was autonomous on the reliability of an election of which the 2015 General Election seems to develop. So many Nigerians after the voting understood that their elections may count and as such the public willpower could be appreciated in the future elections. This has strengthened the legitimacy of the Nigerians in the self-governing process. Secondly, the issue of electoral misconducts was greatly reduced. For example, the inflation of the number of voters present and the problem of multiple voting at the polling places were reduced (Okonji, 2015).

The machine has checkmated the unfair attitude perpetrated by some politicians in the polling units during election. Thirdly, post-election hearings were minimized. There was a kind of departure from the past history where most elections outcomes are being contested at the electoral tribunal. Most of the aspirants that loses in the 2015 General Election did not challenge the result. In fact, some of the main contenders even embraced and acknowledged the winners. For instance, the People's Democratic Power's presidential aspirant instantly congratulated the APC's presidential candidate, who emerged as the winner of that presidential election. This approach also transpired across many states of the country both in the governorship and the assembly elections (Okonji, 2015).

In addition, post electoral conflicts and violence were very minimal because of the as the transparency and credibility of the election due to the help of the voter's card readers. It is imperative also to know that issues like political thuggery were actually reduced because it does not give room for manipulation of election result by the politicians through the use of youths(Okonji, 2015). Finally, the impact of

voter's card reader was evidently analyzed in this paper since the electorates can now have confidence in the participation of their own election because their votes count.

Perception on Why the Card Readers Should be Use in the Elections in Nigeria

With a lot of desperate politicians planning to win the elections by every means possible, some have gone ahead to buy thousands of PVCs from people in order to use them to vote for themselves. The card reader will go a long way in preventing frauds like that, as only the rightful owner of the card can use it to vote. Many Nigerians don't bother participating in electoral activities, not because they don't want to but because they believe their votes don't and won't count, so they think it's all a waste of time. The introduction of the Smart Card Readers gave people hope that now, their voice can be heard, and scrapping the use of this card reader will for sure decrease turn-out and will affect the elections (Biyi, 2015).

Therefore, a lot of Nigerians have voiced out their opinion concerning the use of the SCR and it's easy to see that they want it to be used. Nigerians are ready for the development and want to be sure that their votes count. Nigeria is not the first country to use the card reader during elections, particularly in Africa; some other countries have used it and it worked. Although it has its down sides, for example, in Ghana when some biometric verification machines broke down, some voters could not vote, and voting was extended to the next day but in the end a winner emerged and the machines did their jobs successfully (Biyi, 2015).

Free and Fair Election a Key to Public Confidence and Participation in An Election

It is also imperative to know that public confidence is built on the premise of free and fair election. Thus, according to Thad & Susan (2015), public confidence in the democratic procedure is an important aspect of sovereign legitimacy (Llewellyn, 2007; Birch, 2008; Llewellyn, Hall, & Alvarez, 2008). Elections propose an opportunity not for people to only participate in the ruling through choosing representatives, but also aid in creating trust in governing societies and democracy in general (Banducci& Karp, 2003).

Certainly, free and fair votes are seen as a recognized requisite for democracy (Dahl, 1971; Svensson & Elklit, 1997). Free and fair election is given special significant for transitional countries developing from civil war or tyrannical rule as an initial step on the way to democratization. Sufficient literature recommends that electoral the rule, rather than the exclusion (Birch, 2011; Hyde, 2011; Norris,

2014). Various researchers have pointed to the harmful consequences when electorates have a low level of confidence in a given election. Cynicism in election quality can be linked to lesser voter participation in some countries and regional case studies as well as in the cross-national studies (Carreras & Irepoglu, 2013; Simpser, 2013).

In numerous cases, public dissatisfaction over fraudulent elections encouraged mass demonstrations and generated violent uprisings, causing hundreds of losses (Kenya 2008, Nigeria 2011) (Beaulieu, 2014; Bunce&Wolchik, 2011; Hyde &Marinov, 2011; Meirowitz& Tucker, 2013). Actually, what matters for voter self-confidence in elections and democratic bodies may not be contingent on the value of election, but on their party's affiliation and it relations to the election result. In essence, victor and loser effects have been broadly measured using survey data. The evolving consensus is that through a diverse of institutional settings, citizen support for a particular election winners or losers are likely to influences the number of variables, which include civil trust, satisfaction by means of democracy, sustenance for the political structure, and outlooks about the efficiency about the political system (Anderson et al., 2005; Blais & Gélineau, 2007; Esaiasson, 2011; Jou, 2009; Maldonado & Seligson, 2013; S. Singh, Karakoç, & Blais, 2012). Even though, a direct interpretation on the texts on loser and winner effects propose that election losers usually have less confidence in the institutions, and the winners should have better confidence, these special effects are frequently difficult to detached out from other party's influences, assessments of election quality. And, as per this findings suggest, winner or loser effects cannot influence all of the parties equally (Susan&Wallman, 2015).

Building Public Confidence in the Electoral Processes

Elections are part of a political process that, to be successful, requires public confidence. Sound electoral laws and procedures are necessary but are not enough; the public, including the political contestants, must believe that the electoral process will be effectively and impartially implemented. Steps must, therefore, be taken to ensure that the electoral process is not only administratively correct, but is free from the perception of partisanship. It is, therefore, necessary for the government and its electoral administration to take measures beyond the minimum legal requirements to create an expectation that fairness will prevail (*Patrick*, 2009).

Setting up an effective and impartial election apparatus that is open and transparent; involving the political contestants in all basic elements of the election process; opening the election process to the observation of citizens and civic

organizations; convincing the electorate of the importance of the elections, that their personal safety and ballot secrecy will be secured and that the results of their voting will be respected; and ensuring that a trustworthy independent monitoring process will be in place. Building public confidence in electoral processes includes the followings:

Election Commissions

Important aspects of the electoral process are discussed below, but it should be stressed that the body charged with administering the election must be independent and competent to effectively administer the electoral process. If this is not the case, the public and the political competitors will not have confidence in the elections, nor will they have confidence in the resulting government. The public's perception of true independence of electoral authorities is vital in ensuring the legitimacy of the electoral process and the perception of legitimacy of the government that follows the elections (*PatrickM*, 2009).

Transparency

Transparency, in its electoral sense, has numerous aspects which may include the followings:

1) It applies to allowing political contestants to view all aspects of electoral preparations, from the drafting of election laws and selection of electoral administrators all the way through the tabulation of results and resolution of electoral complaints.
2) It also applies to allowing the public to witness the steps of the election process, usually through domestic nonpartisan election monitors and news media.
3) In many countries it even applies to allowing the international community to witness the steps of the election process, usually through impartial international election observers. Transparency builds public confidence under the adage that if you are acting properly you have nothing to hide. Transparency at times adds extra time and requires expending resources, but the cost/benefit ratio of extra time and resources compared to enhanced public confidence almost always favors added transparency (*Patrick*, 2009).

Participation of Political Contestants in All Basic Steps of the Election Process

The political contestants play a crucial role in developing public confidence in the electoral process. If the political contestants are involved in a meaningful way at early stages of the electoral process, including in making decisions about electoral

law and regulation and in determining the method of selecting the bodies for election administration, their composition and powers, the political contestants will be more trustful of the actions of election administrators, which in turn will greatly affect public perceptions of the election process. Likewise, the involvement of political contestants in each step as the election process unfolds reinforces public confidence (*Patrick*, 2009).

International Adjuncts to Electoral Bodies and International Election Observers Can Be Important

The international community can play a supportive role in the electoral process in transitional democracies. The role of providing technical assistance to electoral bodies and others in the election process is clearly established. Such activity not only demonstrates international support for democratic processes and institutions in a country but helps build public confidence in the election process(*Patrick,* 2009).

International Election Observers

Impartial international election observers, organized by intergovernmental organizations and by non governmental organizations, can play a constructive and sometimes critical role in enhancing public confidence in the electoral process. Such efforts demonstrate the interest and concern of the international community in supporting the democratic process in a particular country. This can help deter those who would seek to manipulate the election process and reassure those who may be skeptical of the integrity of the election process(*Patrick*, 2009).

Participation of Citizens in the Election Process as Central to Public Confidence

Election monitoring by impartial domestic NGOs adds significantly to public confidence in the election process. Nonpartisan domestic election monitoring also provides an excellent example of citizen participation in governmental processes and of ensuring governmental accountability. This experience often enhances further citizen participation in government, which helps in the development of civil society. Nonpartisan election monitoring is addressed in the Copenhagen Document of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). It is also recognized in the recent United Nations publication, UN Professional Training Series No. 2: "Human Rights and Elections," as helpful in securing public confidence in the electoral process (*Patrick,* 2009).

Ensuring Due Process and Trustworthy Election Monitoring Are Central to Building Public Confidence. In addition to being impartial, the election bodies

must be able to take independent and effective action to protect the integrity of the election process. It is essential that the election system guarantees equal treatment and procedural due process in order to ensure a credible election. Such precautions help ensure the satisfaction of voters and political contestants in situations where they perceive that they have been unfairly treated.

Conclusion

The African Union Election Observer Mission (AUEOM) in Nigeria comment that "The introduction of biometric technologies during voter registration and voting process greatly enhanced the integrity and credibility of the electoral process, despite the challenges experienced. For instance, the introduction of biometric registration and PVCs allowed the INEC to detect and remove duplications and multiple registrations totaling 15,718,756 being 14.8% of registered voters before the commencement of the continuous voter registration. The AUEOM commended efforts by the INEC to ensure that Nigeria has a credible voter's register through the introduction and use of biometric registration technologies. The people of Nigeria largely demonstrated patience and resolve to have a peaceful democratic process, in spite of the uncertainties and apparent delays that characterized the elections"(AUEOM, 2015).

Base on the above comment, there is no doubt that the card reader has greatly played a very substantial role in the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria. However, there is a need to make sure that such issues and challenges that confronted the operation of the electoral device during and after the elections shall be prevented in the forthcoming elections. Consequently a number mechanism is needed to be in place by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) for the arrangement of the voter's card readers in the future elections so as to support the democratization process in the country.

The INEC must ensure that its activities and conduct in the future elections is more transparent especially with the coming of technology like the voter's card reader. This is because transparency and trust are the key principles in every credible election, and in turn it will bring about hope and public confidence in the process of our electoral system. Also the INEC should carry out a widely effective awareness campaign on the voter's card reader or any other machinery tool to be set in upcoming elections. In note shell, this paper has proven that electorates may still rely on election as their method for changing the leadership of the country. Moreover, Nigerians can now have confidence in election which encourages the level of turnout during elections and political participation. Hence, card reader can be a means of minimizing various type of electoral malpractice. Finally, In

spite of these challenges, 2015 was among the historical year in the history of Nigerian election. The hope is that in the subsequent election to come, this paper analyses and predicts that there will be more political participation by the citizens.

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