The Role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the 2015 Presidential Election of Nigeria

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Abstract

The use of ICT in elections has been attracting a lot of interests in the country and has been a subject for discussion in various media during the past years after elections. The paper based method of voting during elections in Nigeria comes with a lot of problems such as delay in voting, multiple voting, result manipulations, invalid votes and delay in declaring results. This paper investigated the feasibility of ICT implementation in Nigeria by assessing the role played by ICT in the 2015 elections. It relied on documentary method for the generation of data. Using the diffusion of innovation theory, the research concluded that ICT has reinforced the legitimacy of Nigerians in the democratic process as majority after the elections believed that their votes counted and as such their will could be respected in future elections. Thus, it is recommended that the innovation of ICT shouldn't only be welcomed but also incorporated into the Nigeria's electoral system as a lasting solution to electoral fraud. The Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended) should be amended to include the use of the card reader for biometric verification of voters for the purpose of accreditation in future elections.

Keywords: E-participation, ICT, Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT), Nigeria, 2015 Presidential elections.

Introduction

The most significant feature that accords any nation a democratic statute is the concept of periodic elections, as no political entity can be described as democratic if it is devoid of elections. Among other things, elections create a channel for competitiveness that allows public offices to be keenly contested for by qualified candidates with a view to rendering selfless services to the people. The populace are thus empowered by the political system to determine who represents their political and socio-economic interests in public offices. Elections have therefore become vital tools by which the people, who constitute the electorate, periodically assess the capability and credibility of individuals who contest for leadership positions. It becomes imperative to assert that the electoral system of any given polity is a decision making process that empowers the populace to choose the most qualified leaders to administer the political, social, and economic affairs of the nation. In recent times, Nigeria, as well as other nations across the globe, has included technology in their electoral processes. In lieu of this, it becomes imperative to assess the extent to which technology affected the 2015 general elections in the country. This is with a view to determining the best electoral process, and enhancing the growth and development that suits Nigeria as a political entity.

Since her independence in 1960, Nigeria as a political entity has been enmeshed with electoral violence. This factor is deeply embedded in the inability of the electoral system of the country to organize and conduct free, fair and credible elections since it attained self rule. The early elections conducted in her post-colonial era, such as in the first republic, were marred by diverse irregularities "which ranged from manipulations of election results among the key members of the political elite, systemic disenfranchisement of eligible voters, election rigging and use of political thugs even to snatch ballot boxes from electoral officers, multiple registration of voters, multiple voting, killing or maiming of political opponents to intimidate supporters, under-aged voting, buying of voters' cards for unregulated and unsupervised voting, hiring of machinery voters from neighbouring countries, to post-election litigations, among many voters" (Nwagwu, 2011). All these has culminated in political instability and politically related crisis such as the January 1966 military coup and counter coup of July 1966 and a follow-up pogrom meted out against the Eastern Nigeria that birthed the declaration of the sovereign state of Biafra in 1967 by Odumegwu Ojukwu of the Eastern region of Nigeria and the bloody 30 months Nigeria/Biafra civil war (Nwagwu, 2011).

To prevent the resurgence of these electoral vices that has dire effects on the socio-economic and political development of the nation, a new political paradigm, the use of information and communication technology (ICT), which was first introduced by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 2003 to register eligible voters and compile credible voters register with a view to consolidating the nascent democracy, became highly imperative. These reforms contributed largely to the success of the 2011 elections, yet the risk of flaws affecting Nigerian elections still remains. Part of the reforms lead to the introduction of card reading machine in the conduct of 2015 general election. The use of ICT in election management became imperative to the elimination of multiple registrations, which had remained one of the most vital political weapons for rigging elections by unscrupulous and savage elements. This unique technique was employed to capture mass involvement in governance and empowerment of the teeming electorates to participate in electoral processes.

Elections in Today's Democracy: from Ballot to E-Voting

The traditional electoral system essentially focused on the use of ballot papers, and this was the norm in the 19th century and a large part of the 20th century (Margetts, 1998). However, revolutions in information and communication technologies (ICT) have shrunk the world and rendered national borders irrelevant and traditional legal and political sovereignties ineffectual.

ICT has at once villagized the globe and globalized the village. The consumption patterns of one major country are now likely to affect the economies and political systems of other countries. ICT has transformed information and knowledge as the most critical factors in business transactions as well as in political decision-making processes.

The technologically advanced nations in west, majorly Europe and America, were the first to adopt ICT in their electoral system, and also in the process of governance. Interest in using ICTs to develop an electronic democracy first emerged in the USA in the early 1970s. Most experiments with electronic democracy are heavily dependent upon features of American political culture.

Properly implemented, e-voting solutions can eliminate certain common avenues of fraud, speed up the processing of results, increase accessibility and make voting more convenient for citizens and in some cases, when used over a series of electoral events, possibly even reducing the cost of elections or referendums in the long term. If not carefully planned and designed, the introduction of e-voting can undermine confidence in the whole electoral process. It is therefore important to devote adequate time and resources to considering its introduction and looking at previous experiences of electronic voting.

The Role of ICT in the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria

The smart card reader which was used for the first time in Nigeria's electoral process was the most contentious issue and a critical component of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria but remains one of the greatest innovative technologies in the history of Nigerian elections.

Past elections in Nigeria had witnessed the desperate bid for political power by many stakeholders with vested interests in the Nigerian electoral process. Some of these stakeholders engaged in all forms of electoral malpractices including multiple voting, impersonation, manipulation and falsification of results which had led to legal actions, electoral conflicts and violence.

Electoral malpractices make the citizens lose trust in electoral processes; and lack of confidence by the citizens in the democratic process obstructs the deepening of electoral democracy because if the citizens do not believe in the fairness, accuracy, openness, and basic integrity of the election process, the very basis of any democratic society might be threatened (Alvarez and Hall, 2008). In view of the negative impacts of electoral malpractices, global attention is now focusing on how to mitigate this undemocratic behaviour and improve the electoral process. One of such strategies to combat electoral malpractices is the introduction of information and communication technology into the electoral process. Although the use of technology in elections is not an end in itself, it assists in the various aspects of electoral administration (ACE Project, n.d). It is against this background that an electronic technologically based device, the smart card reader was introduced into the Nigerian electoral process in 2015 to help improve and deepen electoral democracy.

The smart card reader is a technological device setup to authenticate and verify on election day a Permanent Voter Card (PVC) issued by INEC. The device uses a cryptographic technology that has ultra-low power consumption, with a single core frequency of 1.2GHz and an Android 4.2.2. Operating System (INEC, 2015). In other words, the card reader is designed to read information contained in the embedded chip of the permanent voter's card issued by INEC to verify the authenticity of the Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) and also carry out a verification of the intending voter by matching the biometrics obtained from the voter on the spot with the ones stored on the PVC (Engineering Network Team, 2015).

The ability of the card reader to perform the above described functions as well as keeping a tally of the total numbers of voters accredited at the polling unit and forwarding the information to a central database server over a Global System for Mobile (GSM) network makes the card reader most welcome at this point in time in the nation's electoral history (Engineering Network Team, 2015). Among the fundamental basis for the deployment of the technologically-based device in the 2015 general elections by INEC was to prevent electoral fraud; to allow the electorates votes to count; to reduce litigations arising from elections; to authenticate and verify voters; to protect the integrity and credibility of the election; to audit results from polling units across the federation; to ensure transparency and accountability; to build public confidence and trust in the election; to reduce electoral conflicts; to ensure a free and fair election and to further deepen Nigeria's electoral and democratic process.

In spite of the laudable goals and objectives of the smart card reader, it generated debates among the 2015 general elections stakeholders before, during and after the polls. The proponents of the device according to Peters (2015) believed that the card reader procedure has the capacity to prevent or minimize rigging in the sense that there would not be multiple voting while the opponents believed that in the peculiar circumstances of the Nigerian situation, the card reader is designed to assist a certain political party to win the general election. Peters

(2015) maintained that the major plank of their argument is that the card reader must have been programmed to assist a pre-determined winner of the election by ensuring that so many persons would discriminately be disenfranchised to deny other parties of favourable votes thereby ensuring the winning of an INEC preferred or pre-determined party.

The use of the card reader for the 2015 general elections was also criticized on the premise that its timing was too close for over a sixty eight million Nigerian voters. Considering the fact that the device was relatively a new technology that has not been tested or tried in Nigeria, it was therefore argued that INEC should step aside the card reader in the 2015 general elections.

To address the issue of the card reader not being tested, INEC hurriedly conducted a test-run of the device on March 7, 2015 (21 days to the commencement of the polls) in twelve states (consisting of 225 polling units and 358 voting points) of the federation. Some of the card readers could not function effectively during the test-run. However, INEC promised to deal with the issue. This test-run exercise was carried out after the general elections were rescheduled. In order words, INEC could have conducted the general elections without test-running the device.

This could have created a disaster for INEC that could only be imagined.

The legality of the use of the card reader in the 2015 general elections was one crucial aspect of the debates that critics of the card readers contested. To examine this debate, a careful study of the Nigeria's electoral jurisprudence is needed to determine whether the use of the smart card reader by INEC falls within the confines of the law. Firstly, as argued earlier, it is clear that INEC is a creation of the law as it is established under Section 153 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) as a Federal Executive Body. Under paragraph 15 of Part 1 of the Third Schedule to the 1999 Constitution (as amended), INEC is mandated to organize, undertake and supervise all elections in Nigeria, conduct the registration of persons qualified to vote and prepare, maintain and revise the registration of voters for the purpose of any election (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2015). It is also empowered to carry out the functions conferred upon it by virtue of the Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended).

The deployment of the card reader by INEC is not illegal Falana (2015). He also stated that INEC has the constitutional power to set the standards and guidelines for elections. In view of this, he argued that the card reader is part of accreditation and not voting. He maintained that what the law proscribed is electronic voting and not the card readers. Therefore, according to him the use of the card reader in the 2015 general elections is legal and legitimate (cited in Oderemi, 2015).

Banire (2015) contended that the electronic voting machine and the card reader are two different devices that are not necessarily deployed together for all purposes. He explained that a card reader is not an electronic voting machine but a machine to be used for accreditation of voters only before the actual voting. According to him, electronic voting requires no ballot papers whereas the 2015 general election was ballot paper-based. He submitted that what Section 52(2) prohibits as indicated earlier is the use of electronic voting machine but not the use of card reader for accreditation of voters.

In spite of the agitations about the card reader, it was eventually used for the 2015 general elections. However, the device had some challenges in its operations during the elections.

The Challenges of ICT in the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

The challenges of information and communication technology in the 2015 elections in Nigeria are as follows;

- The overall level of information and awareness about the card reader was poor. Quite a large number of Nigerians especially the electorates in rural communities were completely unaware of the device as many had neither seen nor heard about the card reader until the day of the election.
- There were lots of misconceptions about the device. Some of the electorates thought card readers were voting devices. This inadequate dissemination of information and poor sensitization of the electorates on the card reader resulted to poor human relations as well as uncooperative attitudes between some of the illiterate electorates and election officials.
- The training given to the ad hoc and INEC staff on the use of the card reader was rather inadequate. A large percentage of the Presiding Officers and Assistant President Officers I in the polling units were not intensively trained on the proper use and handling of the card reader.
- Breakdown and malfunctions of the devices were also witnessed during the elections. Although INEC had provided back-ups in case of any card reader breakdown, some of these back-ups failed to function as well.
- A few of the card readers were unable to function due to blank screen, non activation of the Subscriber Identification Module (SIM) card in the device and low battery.
- Some of the devices were confronted with the challenge of PVC authentication and biometric data verification of the voters in the polling units which was part of the accreditation process for the election. A good number of the PVC issued to voters by INEC could not be authenticated thereby disenfranchising some eligible voters in the elections. Wherein some voters cards were authenticated,

their biometric data could not be verified after several trials; and where it is verified, it is slow.

Theoretical Framework

This work adopts the diffusion of innovation theory, otherwise known as innovation diffusion theory (IDT). The theory was first postulated by Everett Rogers in his book titled *Diffusion of Innovations*, first published in 1962 and now in its fifth edition. Since then, research on the diffusion of innovation has been widely applied in disciplines such as education, sociology, communication, agriculture, marketing, and information technology, etc (Rogers, 1995; Karahanna, et al., 1999; Agarwal, Sambamurthy, & Stair, 2000).

An innovation is "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or another unit of adoption" (Rogers, 1995). Diffusion is "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Rogers, 1995). Therefore, the IDT theory argues that "potential users make decisions to adopt or reject an innovation based on beliefs that they form about the innovation" (Agarwal, 2000).

IDT includes five significant innovation characteristics: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, and trial-ability and observability. Relative advantage is the degree to which an innovation is considered as being better than the idea it replaced. This construct is found to be one of the best predictors of the adoption of an innovation. Compatibility is the degree to which innovation is regarded as being consistent with the potential end-users' existing values, prior experiences, and needs. Complexity is the end-users' perceived level of difficulty in understanding innovations and their ease of use. Trial-ability is the degree to which innovations can be tested on a limited basis. Observability is the degree to which the results of innovations can be visible by other people. These characteristics are used to explain end-user adoption of innovations and the decision-making process (Rogers, 1962).

The work posited that Nigeria chooses to adopt the use of ICT in general elections when it saw the observable results or success attained by other nations that were early adopters of e-voting, and also its relative advantage as compared to the use of ballot paper, simplicity and ease of use and its compatibility with the existing values of varying cultures in Nigerians. The work also suggests that the adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) in conducting elections was spurred by the heterophilous nature of the Nigerian state.

Conclusion

The use of the ICT, specifically card reader resulted to several debates before, during and after the 2015 general elections. However, the important impact of the device regardless of its various challenges during the election cannot be quantified. Although, the card reader deployment by INEC was to improve the electoral process and deepen the democratic process, however, lack of trust, suspicion and altercations among the stakeholders with vested interest in the election created tension within the body polity. With the use of the card reader in the 2015 general elections and the gradual deployment of technology in subsequent general elections in Nigeria, the prospect of Nigeria belonging to one of the countries of the world where elections are driven largely by technology is quite close.

Going forward, Nigeria should emulate countries such as Estonia, Namibia and Brazil that have used e-voting successfully. The introduction of PVCs and Card Readers into the 2015 general elections reduced electoral fraud and time wasting. That is an indication that Nigeria can improve through the adoption of advanced ICT in the conduct of elections. INEC still needs to undergo continuous restructuring especially in areas such as staffing and staff development. INEC should be capable of boasting of a workforce that is well qualified as well as efficient. The training of staff is required especially as new technologies are beginning to displace the old methods of conducting elections.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers recommended that:

1. There is need for INEC to consult widely and carryout necessary and effective campaigns on the card reader and any other technology to be used in future elections.
2. Adequate training of election of temporary and permanent INEC officials should be conducted ahead of time in future elections including practical demonstrations on using the device effectively.
3. Card readers should be sufficient and made available during the training session. Each of the trainees should undergo a mock test during training.
4. INEC must frequently update and re-examine the importance of the card reader to future elections in Nigeria because technology is changing and the level of technological change is rapid such that a device used five years ago may not be too relevant or as relevant to the present day.
5. The use of Electronic Card Reader must be perfected to avoid technical hitches as experienced during the last elections.

6. Ballot scanning machine should be introduced to scan used ballot papers and record votes in real time.
7. There must be compulsory Presidential Debate to enhance quality of choice. Political campaigns in the last elections were bereft of ideas and more of character assassination and mundane issues.
8. There must be intense war against Poverty to discourage vote selling.

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