

The Impacts of Smart Card Readers on Election Credibility in Nigeria: A Study of 2015 Presidential Election in Ekeremor Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

The central issue in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria was the use of the Smart Card Reader, which was a critical component in the election. It was used for the first time in the electoral process of Nigeria and it remains one of the greatest technological innovations of the 2015 presidential election. The Smart Card Reader is a technological device set up to authenticate and verify, on Election Day, a permanent voter's card issued by the Independent National Electoral Commission. The fundamental basis for deploying the technological device was to ensure a credible, transparent, free and fair election and thereby to deepen Nigeria's democracy. However, the use of the Card Reader generated debate among election stakeholders before, during and after the 2015 general elections. This study is located in Ekeremor Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Four objectives were formulated to achieve and three (3) hypotheses were also discerned. The sample size for the study was 180 respondents. Data was collected with the use of the researcher's constructed questionnaires. Data collected was analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) tabulations, mean and percentages (%). Inferal statistics and chi-square were employed to test the hypotheses. From the findings of the study it was revealed that the chi-square calculated ($x\text{-cal}$) of 2.71 and the chi-square tabulated ($x\text{-tab}$) of 2.69 ($p=2.71>2.69$). This was an indication that the Smart Card Reader has credibility on the conduct of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The study concluded the evolution of Smart Card Reader technology marks the significant development of the world. It was recommended that all Nigerians should accept the use of Smart Card Readers in the conduct of elections at all levels. Both INEC and Adhoc staff should be properly trained on the use of Smart Card Readers to eliminate the challenges experienced in the past general elections.

Keywords: *impacts, smart card readers, permanent voter's card and election credibility.*

1. Introduction

Election is whereby an electoral process chooses, by voting, officers either to act on its behalf or represent it in an assembly with a view to governing or administering. An electorate refers to a class of citizens entitled (by a law option) to vote in an election, by whatever procedure (Santon, 1983).

Elections provide for a bare minimum of political participation, perhaps the only act of participation for the vast majority of governed, and therefore create a feeling of belonging and a degree of responsibility for government decisions. Elections could be seen as institutionalized procedures for the choosing of office holders by some or all the recognized members of a society. So an electoral system exists to provide the electorate with opportunity and the right to choose their representatives and maintain contact with them. Hence, for an electoral system to be democratic, it must provide for equal electorate and the freedom by that electorate to make a real and meaningful choice devoid of coercion or intimidation (Eminue, 2005). In effect, election would be deemed to be democratic and hence good if it is free and fair and not based on patronage of any kind.

Therefore, elections in Nigeria though seen as a means of controlling the government; within the context of electorate's participation reveal a rather disturbing 'state' that has called for serious concern. Duru (2002) noted that, indeed the Nigerian electoral process since independence has gained an unenviable reputation for fraudulent practices. This situation has forced many to see elections in Nigeria as a mirage or a mere 'selection', selection in sense that the electorate are left out of the entire system, owing to the fact that elections are conducted with or without due involvement of the people. The system operates in a way that suggests a total disregard and misapplication of democratic ethos. Thus, the outcome has always been manipulated in favour of candidates of the powerful few. This is unfair and shameful, given the democratic system we opted for. It is better telling the people that the leaders would be 'selected' so that they would not bother to queue up in the scorching sun. But allowing them to vote and later turning things upside down is the height of betrayal that must be resisted. Elections help to determine periodic tests of parties' and candidates' acceptance and popularity. They also confer

legitimacy on public office-holders, and subject public office-holders and political parties to periodic assessment. By so doing, elections enhance accountability and good governance (Okolie, 2005:436).

Elections are critical components of any democratic society. As such, Nigeria's return to democratic rule and engagement with the democratic process led to the conduct of its general elections in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015. General elections are elections conducted in the federation at large for federal and state elective positions (The Electoral Institute 2014).

The 2015 general election appears to have been the most keenly contested in the history of elections in Nigeria. It was the first time about four major opposition parties came together to form a very strong party, the All Progressive Congress (APC) in order to challenge the dominance of the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the polity. According to Omotola (2013:172) the election became the only game in town, shaping and reshaping public discourse and political actions.

Prior to the 2015 general elections, a number of technologically based reforms were embarked upon by the new leadership of the Independence National Electoral Commission (INEC), headed by Prof. AttairuJega. These included the biometric register of voters and an advanced finger print identification system. INEC is the election management body empowered by the 1999 constitution (as amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to organize, undertake and supervise all elections in Nigeria.

The use of biometrics in African elections is on the rise. No fewer than 25 Sub-Saharan African countries (including Sierra-Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Malawi, Rwanda, Senegal, Somaliland, Mali, Togo and Ghana) had already held elections employing biometric voters register (Piccolino 2015:38). In Nigeria, the automated finger print identification system was used in the 2011 general elections to eliminate multiple registrations from the voters list, but it was not capable of verifying the identity of voters at the polling stations (Piccolino, 2015:22). In view of this, INEC adopted the use of the permanent voter's card (PVC) system and introduced Smart Card Reader technology, a device used to scan PVCs to verify the identity of voters at the polling booths. The Smart Card Reader was one of the greatest innovations of the biometric verification technology and a controversial but crucial aspect of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Other African countries, including Ghana, Kenya and Somaliland, had adopted biometric verification technology. The technology is particularly useful in settings where governments have not previously established reliable or complete paper-based identification systems for their populations (Gelb & Decker, 2012).

Concerned about the massive electoral fraud witnessed in past general elections in Nigeria, INEC's deployment of the Card Reader during the 2015 general elections was aimed at ensuring a credible, transparent, free and fair election. This would deepen Nigeria's electoral democracy. However, the use of the electronic device in the 2015 general elections generated debate among election stakeholders at the time of the elections. In this paper we focus mainly on the impact of the Card Reader in the 2015 general elections and the future of the Smart Card Reader, but we also examined some of the challenges of the Card Reader related to the elections.

2. Selected Issues in the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

The 2015 general election was the closest electoral contest since the country's post 1999 transition to multi-party democracy (International Republican Institute 2015). The election was the most politically engaged in the history of electoral democracy in Nigeria. Huge resources were used for the elections, including 120 billion naira expended by INEC, with election staff numbering 750,000 adhoc members and more than 360,000 security personnel. The presidential election was contested by fourteen candidates from different political parties. The candidates from the PDP, Dr. GoodluckEbele Jonathan, and the APC, General MuhammaduBuhari, were the major contenders.

The 2015 general election was the fifth general election since Nigeria resumed democratic rule in 1999. Nigerians went into the general elections with renewed determination to exercise their voting rights and stood to monitor and protect their votes with anything and everything (Momodu, 2015:12). The election was bedeviled with issues that almost denied Nigerians the opportunity of voting their representatives into government for another four years. These issues almost affected the integrity, quality and management of the election. Indeed, quality election management is crucial to sustaining democracy. If the citizenry does not believe in the fairness, accuracy, openness and basic integrity of an electoral process, the very basis of democratic society can be threatened. This implies that public faith in the integrity of the election system is a cornerstone of democratic government (Alvarez & Hall 2008:134). In view of this principle, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2015) argued that a legitimate electoral process and public confidence in democratic governance depend on both the actual and perceived integrity of an election. Some issues in the 2015 general election were security threats and election postponement, the expiration of tenure of the INEC Chairman, and the introduction of electronic technology.

Security threats and election postponement: the 2015 general election was conducted amidst security threats and challenges, especially the Boko Haram insurgency. The Boko Haram insurgents had engaged in kidnapping,

massive killings and Wanton destruction of property. The terrorist group had also captured territories in Nigeria, which was effectively under their control, and the insurgents had threatened to disrupt the 2015 general elections. Against this backdrop, the 2015 general election which was scheduled to be held on 14th and 28th February 2015 was postponed by INEC to 28th March and 11th April, 2015. The National Security Adviser, Col. (Rtd.) SamboDasuki, stated that the general elections scheduled for February 2015 could not be guaranteed in view of the security threats and challenges across the country. According to Dasuki this was because most men in the Nigerian Army were engaged in Nigeria's north-east, confronting Boko Haram insurgents. He contended that six weeks' postponement of the general elections would enable the armed forces to subdue and reclaim the territories that were effectively under the control of the Boko Haram.

The postponement was received with mixed feelings. Some individuals, groups and political parties – especially the PDP supported the decision. Supporters of the postponement were of the view that it would guarantee peace and security across the country. Other individuals, groups and political parties – particularly the APC outrightly rejected the rescheduling of the 2015 general election. Some parties, including APC, accused the PDP led Federal Government of deliberately allowing insurgency in the north-east, an opposition stronghold, to fester so that the party could catch in on the crisis and be re-elected. Adichie (2015) has argued that the postponement was a flailing act of desperation by Dr. Goodluck Jonathan not to lose the election. Jonathan was the Nigerian President between 2011 and 2015 and he was the PDP's Presidential Candidate in 2015 general elections. Similarly, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, former Nigerian president (1999 – 2007), described the date shift as a grand plan by the PDP presidential candidate to win the election at all costs. Nwankwo (cited in Kendhammer, 2015) believed that the intention behind the rescheduling was to undermine the democratic process and to stop support growing for APC in the country.

It seems INEC was persuaded by the security apparatus of the Nigerian State to reschedule the 2015 general elections, and this singular act embarrassed Nigeria and Nigerians. Indeed, the postponement of the election appears almost to erode public credibility and confidence in the elections. Billions of naira from the public coffer had already been expended towards preparing for the election despite the Boko Haram's annexation of territories. Considering the security threats and challenges, how could people, materials and logistical arrangements be distributed and managed effectively for a violence-free election during and after the poll with its changed dates?

The contention by some stakeholders in the 2015 elections that territories captured by the terrorist group could have been excluded from the poll appears to us as irrational. The question would be, are these groups of people Nigerians? Had these categories of people been excluded in the 2015 elections, it would have amounted to a breach of their democratic and fundamental human rights. This may have led to legal actions that would have impacted negatively on the general elections. Some stakeholders were quick to mention that countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq have successfully held elections although they were in a state of war. However, this statement does not accurately reflect the true situation in these countries. The security of an election is unique to the circumstances in which it is conducted. The stakes for any given election are different even if elections are held periodically in the same country owing to the changing forces that shape the national interest and corresponding political agenda (Dunne, 2006:24). Neither Afghanistan nor Iraq had any of their territories under the effective control of the terrorist groups that operated in these countries when their general elections were conducted in April, 2014. The terrorist groups Taliban in Afghanistan, and Islamic state of Iraq and Levant in Iraq. The terrorists groups were in these countries usually embarked on suicide bombings and attacks. Infact, within 48 hours of their respective general elections, security personnel and civilians' lives and property were destroyed.

Security is a critical component of electoral democracy. Indeed, good security is one of the requirements to achieve credible and transparent elections. Ensuring a fairly secure environment for voters and sensitive materials on Election Day in all areas of the country is a necessary condition for holding democratic elections. The absence of basic security measures will jeopardize, if not severely harm, the acceptability of the results (Lopez-Pintor, 2010:15).

To ensure the integrity of the electoral process, various security measures need to be instituted during all phases of an election (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2015). Indeed, the assurance of equitable security during an electoral process is essential to retaining the participants' confidence and commitment to an election. Consequently, security is integral to the goal of an electoral process (Dunne, 2006:18). In view of this, INEC could not guarantee the safety of lives and property before, during and after the elections. However, this fact calls into question of the primary responsibility of government which is to provide security and welfare for its citizens as enshrined in section 14(b) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Furthermore, the 2015 general election rescheduling was within the constitutionally stimulated period for the conduct of the elections by INEC. The 1999 Constitution (as amended) stipulates that elections for the offices of president and vice-president, governors and deputy governors and members of the National Assembly and House

of Assembly be held not earlier than 150 days and not later than 30 days before the expiration of the office of the last holder. In addition, section 25 of the Electoral Act (as amended) empowers INEC to set a date not earlier than 150 days but not later than 30 days before the expiration of the term of office of the last holder.

Smart Card Reader: the real issue in the 2015 general election.

The Smart Card Reader was the most contentious issue in the 2015 general election. The Smart Card Reader was a critical component in this election and it was used for the first time in Nigeria’s electoral process. The Card Reader remains one of the greatest innovative technologies from 2015 general election.

Past elections in Nigeria had witnessed the desperate bid for political power by some stakeholders with vested interests in Nigeria’s electoral process. Certain stakeholders engaged in all forms of electoral malpractices including multiple voting, impersonation, manipulation and falsification of results which led to legal action, electoral conflict and violence. Electoral malpractices make citizens lose confidence in the electoral process, and lack of confidence by citizenry in the democratic process is an impediment to deepening electoral democracy. If the citizenry does 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 & Hall 2008:134).

According to Lopez-Pintor (2010:9) opined that electoral fraud has even more serious political implications in which allows a party or candidate to take over public positions contrary to the popular will. This undermines the democratic process and usually leads to electoral violence, insecurity and political instability. The governments of Cote d’Ivoire, Peru and Serbia all collapsed in 2000 as a result of popular rebellions against fraudulent elections. Similarly, the so-called ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine in 2004 led to Presidential elections being completely reheld after extensive fraud was demonstrated (Lopez-Pintor 2010:5).

In view of the negative effects of electoral malpractice, global attention is now focusing on how to mitigate this undemocratic behaviour and improve the electoral process. One strategy to combat electoral malpractice is the introduction of information and communication technology into the electoral process. The use of electronic technology in elections is not an end in itself but assists with various aspects of electoral administration (ACE project n.d).

3. Data, Methodology and Study Area

The study is confined to Ekeremor Local Government Area of Bayelsa State of Nigeria. Ekeremor local government area is one of the eight local government areas that constitute Bayelsa State. Ekeremor local government area was an offshoot of Sagbama local government area. It was created on the 1st of October, 1991.

The research design adopted for this study is the cross-sectional survey method which the investigation is aimed at collecting information on certain variables of the study population at one point in time. The data was obtained through the administration of questionnaires. A total of 180 questionnaires were distributed in twelve (12) communities in Ekeremor local government area of Bayelsa State. The composition is ninety (90) politicians and ninety (90) INEC staff. In the area of data presentation and analysis, statistical procedures such as frequency tables, tabulations, and chi-square statistics were employed to reduce the raw data.

4. Results and Discussions

Table 1: Responses on whether there is no relationship between the use of Smart Card Reader in the Nigeria’s 2015 general election and electoral malpractice.

Categories	Responses		Total
	Yes	No	
Stakeholders folk	58	32	90
INEC staff folk	54	36	90
Total	112	68	180

Table 2: responses on whether there is a relationship between the use of Smart Card Reader and credibility in the 2015 general election in Nigeria.

Categories	Responses		Total
	Yes	No	
Stakeholders folk	50	40	90
INEC staff folk	55	35	90
Total	105	75	180

Table 3: responses on whether there is no significant relationship between the use of Smart Card Reader and thuggery in the 2015 general election in Nigeria.

Categories	Responses		Total
	Yes	No	
Stakeholders folk	60	30	90
INEC staff folk	53	37	90
Total	113	67	180

In table 1, the result revealed that out of 90 in the stakeholder’s category 58 of the respondents gave answers in the affirmative to the assertion in the hypothesis while 32 of the respondents reacted to the contrary. Also out of 90 in the INEC staff category, 54 of the respondents supported the assertion in the hypothesis while 36 of the respondents reacted to the contrary. From the foregoing analysis, a majority of the stakeholders and the INEC staff held that there is no relationship between the use of Smart Card Reader and election malpractice in the 2015 general election in Nigeria.

In table 2, the result revealed that out of 90 in the stakeholders’ category, 50 of the respondents supported the assertion in the hypothesis while 40 of the respondents reacted to the contrary. Also out of the 90 in the INEC staff category, 55 of the respondents gave affirmative on the assertion in the hypothesis while 35 of the respondents reacted to the contrary. From the foregone analysis, it could be asserted that, there is a significant relationship between the use of Smart Card Reader and election credibility in the 2015 general election in Nigeria.

In table 3, the result revealed that out of 90 in the stakeholders’ category, 60 of the respondents gave affirmative of the assertion in the hypothesis while the remaining 30 respondents reacted to the contrary. Also out of the 90 in the INEC staff category, 53 of the respondents supported the assertion in the hypothesis while 37 of the respondents gave contrary opinion. From the foregone analysis, it is clear that majority of the stakeholders and the INEC staff supported the assertion in the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between the use of Smart Card Reader and thuggery in the 2015 general election in Nigeria.

5. Implications of the Results of the Study

Numerous implications could be derived from the results presented in this study. But we will concern ourselves with a few important implications. According to our data, one of the dependent variables was election credibility but inspite of the challenges that confronted the operation of some of the Smart Card Readers during the 2015 general election, a significant impact of the device usage was observed after the elections. First, the use of the Smart Card Reader led to the increase and reinforcement of public confidence and trust in the electoral process. This public confidence is dependent on the integrity of an election which the 2015 general election appears to possess.

Another contributory implication is that, majority of Nigerians after the elections believed that their votes could count as such their will could be respected in future elections; and this has reinforced the legitimacy of Nigerians in the democratic process.

However, electoral frauds were reduced, inflation of the number of voters present and multiple voting at polling stations were reduced. The device checked the undemocratic attitude of politicians in polling booth electoral malpractices.

The study revealed that, when the Smart Card Readers did not function, a few of the devices were confronted with the challenge of PVC authentication and verification of the voters in the polling units. The authentication and verification of card and voters respectively were components of the accreditation process for the election. A number of PVCs issued to voters by INEC could not be authenticated, thereby disenfranchising some eligible voters in the elections. Where voters’ cards were authenticated, often their holders’ biometric data could not be verified after several trials; and where it was verified, the devices worked slowly. For instance, in Borno State, 10% of eligible voters’ cards were authenticated and biometric data was verified by Card Readers at most of the polling units (Odiakose, 2015)

Put differently, following the widespread failure of the Card Readers, Prof. Jega changed the guidelines for the conduct of elections on 28th March, and approved the use of manual accreditation in areas that the Smart Card Readers had malfunctioned during the Presidential and National Assembly elections in the country (Odiakose, 2015). These changes were made while the election was ongoing and after millions of frustrated voters had gone home disenchanted. The announcement by the INEC Chairman seemed to have eased accreditation in many places. However, the extent to which this announcement may have inadvertently opened the windows for the electoral fraud is yet to be fully analysed (Amenaghawon, 2015). It is unfortunate that the

rules of the game were changed in the middle of the electoral competition. In spite of this, the Smart Card Reader had an impact on the 2015 general elections.

6. Policy Thrust or the Ways Forward

Based on the outcome of this empirical research of the article, the following are the ways forward for this study:

1. All Nigerians should accept the use of Smart Card Readers in the conduct of elections at all levels.
2. Both INEC and Adhoc staff should be properly trained on the use of Smart Card Readers to eliminate the challenges experienced in the 2015 general elections.
3. INEC should insist on the use of trained personnel in Smart Card Reader. There should be no substitution of electoral personnel by politicians during elections.
4. Proper electricity to power Smart Card Reader battery be put in place in all polling units across the country.
5. Electorates should be given proper orientation on the use of Smart Card Readers.
6. There is the need to strengthen electoral laws in conformity with the modern technology used in future elections is germane. The Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended) should be further amended to include the use of the Smart Card Reader for biometric verification of voters, for the purpose of accreditation. The National Assembly should be approached by INEC as soon as possible to amend the electoral legal frameworks regarding the use of Smart Card Readers, in order to address the issue of legality which the Card Reader generated in 2015.

7. Conclusion

The use of the Smart Card Readers generated a debate at the time of the 2015 general elections. However, despite the challenges of using the device it also had a significant and positive impact on the election and its outcome. These influences are not easy to quantify. INEC's aim in deploying the Smart Card Reader was to improve the electoral process and deepen the democratic process. Unfortunately a lack of trust and the occurrence of suspicion and altercations among stakeholders with vested interests in the election created tension within the polity. With the use of the Smart Card Reader in the 2015 general elections, and the gradual deployment of technology in subsequent elections in Nigeria, the prospect of the country becoming one in which elections are largely managed through technology appears to be achieved.

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