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VOTE BUYING, ELECTORAL PROCESS AND PROSPECTS OF E-VOTING SYSTEM IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

Olamide Samson ADELANA (Ph.D)
Department of Political Science and International Relations,
Faculty of Social and Management Sciences,
Anchor University, Lagos.
+2348032854743
oadelana@aul.edu.ng
adelanaolamide@gmail.com

Abstract

The traditional ballot paper method of voting has often been argued as vulnerable to human related errors, influences and manipulations, hence, the introduction, development and utilization of e-voting and counting technologies by various countries all over the world. Also, the traditional voting system in Nigeria has been viewed as susceptible to visible irregularities including a lower level of probity, accountability and transparency as well as characterized by corruptions, acts of oppression, violence, and administrative failures. Specifically, electoral process, which constitutes the bedrock of democracy, seemingly remains weak in the country. This study adopts a descriptive analysis of secondary sources and reveals that vote buying has constituted one of the greatest impediments to a viable electoral process in Nigeria. To this end, this study argues that it is high time the country developed and designed a good voting system with a view to enhancing voting, elections and the integrity of electoral process. The overall computerization of the Nigerian voting system is, therefore, recommended as imperative for enhancing the integrity of pre-election, election and post-elections processes in the country.

Key words: Vote Buying, Electoral Process, E-Voting System, Democracy, Nigeria

Introduction

Election in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has taken various dimensions such as violence, ballot box snatching, rigging, results manipulation, vote monetization, and violation of electoral rules. This necessitates the need to advance the full introduction and adoption of e-voting to cover the core areas of the electoral process such as the casting, counting and transmitting of the votes. The purpose is to curb the above problematic dimensions which have characterized the country's elections, especially in the fourth republic and to reduce direct human control and manipulation in the entire electoral process. There have been some past studies on the use of computer technologies to improve elections and voting system thereby enhancing the essential ingredient of credible election such as transparency, accountability, free and fair play, as against the traditional paper ballot system of voting, which is vulnerable to human error and manipulations (Mercuri 2000; Rubin 2002; Alemika 2011; LeVan and Ukata 2012; Idris and Yusuf 2015). Although these technologies are supported for opening up new frontiers and offering the electoral process new possibilities in the area of voting activities, they are not without some unforeseen risks.

Since electronic voting is often broadly conceived, this study focuses on e-voting systems where information and communication technologies are applied in the registration of voters, casting, recording and counting of votes in political elections thereby protecting the secrecy of the vote and giving credibility to elections. Specifically, e-voting system can be debated as one of the viable forms of technological innovations capable of addressing basic challenges of election and stabilizing democracy. This justifies the reason for the support and embracement of this development by a number of electoral management bodies globally that have keyed into the new technologies with a view to improving the electoral process. E-voting has been adopted by a great number of developed countries and perhaps few developing countries. The introduction of technology to electoral process is to enhance the credibility of election system by making elections free from manipulations, human related errors and unethical influence (Kumar and Walia, 2011; Idris and Yusof, 2015). Countries have intensified their interest in e-voting and the rate at which it is being explored has increased. Nigeria is not an exception in the modern quest for adequate introduction of technology to her electoral process in order to curb increasing challenges associated with elections in the country.

The study is organized into different sections. The first section is the introductory section while the second section focuses on the statement of motivation and research question. The third section presents the theoretical review while the fourth section addresses the conceptual clarification and literature review. The fifth section focuses on the methodology while the discussions of findings are handled in the sixth section. The seventh section presents the conclusion and recommendations.

Statement of Motivation and Research Question

This study is necessitated by the need to examine some of the problems of electoral process in Nigeria and provide justifiable arguments for the introduction, adoption and implementation of e-voting system as well as its positive impact on the electoral process in the country. No doubt, the country's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has conducted general elections in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. The conduct of all these elections by INEC were, however, adjudged as being characterized by various challenges such as violence, manipulation, allegations of rigging, imposition, intimidation,

corruption, excessive spending, vote buying, godfatherism, vote manipulation, fraud, logistic problem, vote monetization, vote buying, intimidation and disfranchisement of voters, multiple and under aged voting, snatching or destruction of ballot boxes, miscomputation and falsification of results, and lack of free and fair election (Elekwa 2008; Alabi 2009; Ogbaudu 2011; Jega and Hillier 2012; Omoleke 2018; Sule et al. 2018; Sule 2019; Ojukwu et al. 2019; Sule et al. 2020). Accordingly, the whole world is focusing on the direction of increasing the use of technology in order to organize credible elections.

Also, the traditional voting system in Nigeria has been viewed as susceptible to visible irregularities including a lower level of probity, accountability and transparency as well as characterized by corruptions, acts of oppression, social and economic inequalities, violence, and administrative failures (Salimonu et al. 2013; Musa and Aliyu 2013; Ahmad et al. 2015; Omoleke 2018; United States Institute for Peace 2019; Sule et al. 2020). The question, therefore, is why the need for the introduction of e-voting system in Nigeria and how could the full adoption and implementation of e-voting system serve as a practicable solution to the resultant effects of irregularities such as flawed voter lists, vote buying, vote monetization, lack of transparency, misuse of incumbency power, and bias of election officials on electoral process in Nigeria?

Theoretical Review

This study reviews technological innovation theory, which helps in designing and implementing acceptable technology. The technological innovation systems theory is conceived as an interaction of network of agents in a specific technology under the infrastructure of a particular institution and involving in generation, diffusion and utilization of technology (Carlsson and Jacobsson, 1991). Conceptually, it is viewed as a set of networks of actors and institutions that engage in interaction and contributing to the development of a novel technology (Carlsson and Jacobsson 1991; Markard and Truffer, 2008). The technological innovation system, according to Bergek et al. (2008), has become relevant because it brings about innovation pertaining to services with a view to achieving service improvement activities. This theory is also believed to have major implications for policy development as it has orientation towards mission and allows changes to occur in services where there is a costly delay in implementing change (Soete et al. 2010).

The fundamental idea of the technological innovation system theory is centered on a competition between a new technology, established or existing technologies as well as emerging technologies. As argued by Markard et al. (2015), the theory is concerned with identifying regularities and patterns in the course of developing innovation in full and implementing process to clarify the conditions of success and failure associated with new technologies. For instance, Edquist (2001) has noted that the structural components and emerging properties of technological innovation system have become the stakeholders' expectations when using the e-voting system, and these include accessibility, verifiability, trust, privacy, transparency and security.

The technology innovation system is relevant to this study as it emphasizes the flow of technology and information among people and institutions as important to an innovative process (Lundvall, 1985). Besides, the theory has been as adjudged as usable in providing useful insights in the systematic analysis and evaluation of e-voting systems (Sambo and Alexander, 2018). It explains the need for active participants like government, political players and the electoral management body to have adequate knowledge of a new technology

while taking the needs of the end users, especially voters into consideration. In the view of Planko et al. (2017), the combination of the knowledge of the key actors is important for innovation to take place. This further justifies the influence of decision makers such as actors, stakeholders, institutions, and society on the adoption and implementation of technologies such as an e-voting system.

Conceptual Clarification and Literature Review

Conceptual Clarification

Vote buying has often been defined as a condition whereby private material benefits are exchanged for political support. For Oladapo, Oyewale and Abayomi (2020), vote buying is a contract or an action in which the voter trades his or her vote to the highest bidder. Accordingly, it is defined as any form of financial, material or promissory inducement or reward by a candidate, political party, agent or supporter to influence a voter to cast his or her vote or even abstain from doing so with a view to enhancing the chances of a particular contestant to win an election (Oladapo et al., 2020). By this is meant that vote buying exists in a situation where the practice of immediate or promised reward to a person for voting or refraining from voting in a particular way.

In most democracies, including Nigerian democracy, vote buying is seen as antidemocratic and considered as an electoral offence. Nigeria also frowns at vote buying as it is prohibited in the country. For instance, Article 130 of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) stipulates thus: A person who corruptly by himself or by any other person at any time after the date of an election has been announced, directly or indirectly gives or provides or pays money to or for any person for the purpose of corruptly influencing that person or any other person to vote or refrain from voting at such election, or on account of such person or any other person having voted or refrained from voting at such election; or being a voter, corruptly accepts or takes money or any other inducement during any of the period stated in paragraph of this section, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of N100,000 or 12 months imprisonment or both.

Vote-buying is described as the transactional process through which voters offer their votes in exchange for sale whereby political parties or public office aspirants or their agents' bargain to buy the votes from the sellers (voters) (Nwagwu, Uwaechia, Udegbunam and Nnamani, 2022). This is related with selling and buying of goods and services in an open market on agreed prices such that in a situation where competition is very high, the process seemingly leads to sales by auction whereby the highest bidder buys from the sellers. In this case, vote buying emphasizes a situation where voters gain private material benefits in return for their political support. As observed by Chukwurah, Egodike, Nnamani and Nduba (2019), vote buying is about giving voters some benefits in form of gifts or incentives in order for them to reciprocate with their votes by voting for the giver or the candidate being promoted by the giver. In other words, voters are offered items for their private use and they are expected to return this gesture from candidates, political parties or their agents for voting them.

Vote buying is simply the use of money and direct benefits to influence voters to vote in a particular direction. Vote buying is not restricted to only money but other materialistic items like food, clothes, and cutleries. This is similar to the views of Schaffer (2007) in that vote buying is a situation in which small material goods, such as money or food are distributed to

prospective voters, in pre-election with the expectation of receiving their votes. It shows how voters are offered money, food or other incentive items so as to vote for a particular party or candidate. This action usually takes place before voters perform their part of the contract. That is, before voters proceed to the poll. In summary, vote buying is all about offering voters some benefits in the form of gifts or incentives in order for them to reciprocate with their votes by voting for the giver, the candidate or the representative. Schaffer (2002) has contended that vote buying is a binding contract, or perhaps an auction in which the voter sells his or her vote to the highest bidder. .For Adigun (2019), vote buying is any form of financial, material or promissory inducement or reward by a candidate, political party, agent or supporter offered with a view to influencing a voter to cast his or her vote or even abstain from doing so in order to boost the chances of a particular contestant to have victory in an election. It is, therefore, assumed that vote buying is any form of practice involving immediate or promised reward to a person or group of for voting or refraining from voting in a particular way.

Electoral process covers total activities and procedures involved in the election of representatives by the electorates including all the activities that precede elections and post elections activities all of which are considered important to electoral success (Akamere, 2001). Accordingly, electoral process is the rules by which the conduct of election is guided as well as important activities that make up an electoral process. Similarly, electoral process is conceived by Elekwa (2008) as relating to the entire cycle ranging from the provision of voter education to the dissolution of the National Assembly. The activities associated with electoral process, therefore, include the political parties' registration, voters' register review, constituencies' delineation, electoral disputes resolution, return of elected representatives, and swearing elected representatives. The INEC (2006) highlights different phases of electoral process as including, delimitation of electoral constituencies; registration of voters; notice of elections; nomination of candidates; election campaigns; elections, announcement of results and completing tribunal sittings; participation of other organizations; and resolution of electoral conflicts from the participation and other organizations or groups.

Electronic voting or e-voting refers to any system where a voter casts his or her ballot using an electronic system, rather than a paper ballot (Everett et al. 2008). These authors explain that once recorded, an electronic vote is stored digitally and transferred from each electronic voting machine to a counting system. Iwu (2008) views e-voting system as one of several forms of automated voting methods which employ computer technology devices in order to improve several aspects of the electoral process. Accordingly, it allows the conduct of elections without the use of traditional ballot paper and box for making a choice at an election in most cases. As conceived by Kumar and Walia (2011), e-voting machine is a simple electronic device used to record votes in place of ballot papers and boxes which were used earlier in conventional voting system. It is described as a simple machine that can be operated without difficulty by both the polling personnel and the voters. It is also emphasized that, being a stand-alone machine without any network connectivity, its programming cannot be interfered with and its result cannot be manipulated by anybody. E-Voting is viewed as an electrical system of voting introduced by advanced countries of the world to improve election processes (Idris and Yusof, 2015). The e-voting machines are designed both to reduce errors and to make the counting process rapid. In the opinion of Ayo et al. (2009), e-voting is a system by which the electoral processes are modernized such that electorates will be able to cast their votes through an electronic device instead of the traditional manual system.

Literature Review

The nature of e-voting system embraces the use of e-voting machine at a polling booth with a view to addressing the issues of voters' authentication, security of voting process, and protection of voted data (Alaguvel et al. 2013). This form of e-voting machine constitutes the focus of this study. Due to the continuous geometrical increase in the costs of voting and in order to save human resource and time, the use of information technology on elections has become the current trend (Ahamed et al. 2019). This has necessitated the need for Electronic voting machine (EVM) system which can be implemented systematically. Accordingly, the e-voting machine is designed with a view to saving time, making it less complex unlike traditional voting system and making voting system to be fair, unique, eligible and secure. For instance, a unique mark empowered EVM has been argued as a need for Bangladesh that has almost 90 million voters with their biometric information (Hague et al. 2015; Ahamed et al. 2019).

The nature of the e-voting machine is such that it is integrated with finger print and various steps of hardware security layers as well as designed to ensure transparency, accuracy, individual voter's verifiability, detecting false voter, time saving, security, complexity reduction, and rapid processing and showing of result in election (Ahamed et al. 2019). Accordingly, the nature and stages of an average EVM should include: the resetting of the system; loading of data; submission of password by presiding officer and setting the current state; asking voter to press finger on finger print; checking voter validity and his/her state number; showing voter validity; showing candidate list; giving vote to desired candidate; closing the vote and submitting password presiding officer; and showing result.

Various actors have necessitated the need for the adoption of e-voting by different countries. For instance, countries such as Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Costa Rica, India, Italy, Panama, Spain, and United Kingdom have experimented with various forms of e-voting. There are some reasons for a government to use electronic systems such as to increase elections activities and to reduce the elections expenses. For instance, different countries implement e-voting systems at various piloting stages to address many challenges associated with manual paper based system such as costs of physical ballot paper and other overheads, electoral delays, distribution of electoral materials, and general lack of confidence in the electoral process (Achieng and Ruhode, 2013). Accordingly, manual voting is often tedious, non-secure, and time-consuming, which leads these countries to think about using electronic facilities to make the process more efficient. It has been argued that e-voting aims at increasing participation, lowering the costs of running elections and improving the accuracy of the results (Qadah and Taha, 2007). Achieng and Ruhode (2013) further explain that there are various factors that motivate a country towards adopting e-voting system which may not necessarily attract the interest of other countries. For instance, the challenges of moving paper ballots around make the use of e-voting technologies potentially beneficial simply on logistic grounds. The argument here is that peculiar factors could explain the use of e-voting technologies in a particular country. The factors may stem from different sources such as cultural, religious, political, legal, environmental, and logistical.

In Nigeria, transition to e-voting adoption is most likely to face wide-raging challenges that are considered essential for successful adoption and implementation. Some of these challenges include absence of legal framework; inadequate database of voters; inadequate requisite ICT infrastructure including electric power supply; apprehension by electorates over the motives behind the proposed e-voting system; loss of trust and confidence on the electoral

officials; digital divides; low level computer literacy and technology phobia among the electorates; inadequate technical and managerial capacity to handle sophisticated technology; security and reliability of the technology; lack of adequate information on the procedures involved in the e-voting system; and the capital intensive nature of e-voting project versus cost effectiveness/value for money (Ahmad et al. 2015). However, it is believed that the introduction of e-voting has the likelihood to help mitigate these challenges and enhance the credibility of electoral process.

It has been affirmed by Abu-Shanab et al. (2010) that the use of e-voting gains some merits over paper based voting because it improves the convenience, efficiency and effectiveness of the election process; it reduces cost of organizing election; it increases participation; it provides alternative option as it improves integrity of election process in general; and above all, it is robust, secured, safe, and it decreases voting errors substantially. By this is meant that if technology is appropriately applied to elections, it can lead to increase in administrative efficiency, reduction in long-term costs and enhancement in political transparency. Kozakova (2011) has also supported the use of technology in electoral process by making reference to convenience as an attribute of e-voting that is capable of enhancing participation as well as providing solution to fatigue associated with traditional voting methods.

Methodology

The study is based on descriptive analysis of facts derived from secondary sources. It relied on qualitative method and was designed to examine the issue e-voting system in relation to its impact on vote buying and electoral process in Nigeria. The information explores was analyzed using appropriate descriptive and document analysis. In this case, document analysis is viewed as a form of qualitative research that relies on a systematic method in analyzing documentary evidence and providing appropriate answers to specific research questions. According to Glenn (2009), document analysis is a systematic approach for documents review and evaluation whereby the information or data derived from printed and electronic material will be subjected to examination and interpretation in order to provide meaning and understanding of a phenomenon as well as develop empirical knowledge.

Discussion of Findings

Nigeria is not an exception in the quest and desire to adopt and implement technological innovation in the conduct of elections. Many countries have considered technology as essential to the conduct of elections and in activities related to the electoral process. For example, technology can be used in various stages of electoral process such as in the compilation of voter lists, drawing of electoral boundaries, management training of staff, printing of ballots, conducting voter education campaigns, and most importantly, it can be used to record votes cast, count vote results and publish election results. The works of Abu-Shanab et al. (2010), Kozakova (2011), Onu and Chiamogu (2012), Kuye et al. (2013), Ahmad et al. (2015), Alausa et al. (2017) and Ahamed et al. (2019) have supported the foregoing arguments on the importance and use of technology in the conduct of electoral process. The use of e-voting is capable of enhancing participation, providing solution to fatigue associated with traditional voting methods as well as preventing vote buying. It has become an easier means for people to express their views and cast their votes, all of which are argued as important requisites for constructive democratic process. The use of e-voting

gains some merits over paper based voting because it improves administrative efficiency, reduces long-term costs and enhances political transparency.

It has been revealed that a comprehensive e-voting system will enhance the standard of elections in a country and curb fraudulent rigging, manipulation and vote buying, which has characterized voting in the recent period. In addition, the use of e-voting technology will reduce human error in the electoral process and increase electoral transparency. The use e-voting system has advantages for electoral process, especially in countries with growing but yet to be stabilized democracy like Nigeria. The study find advantages associated with e-voting as including adequate reporting of electoral activities, convenience in the conduct of elections, increase turnout of voters, elimination of vote buying and reduction in the general expenses associated with election process. The exercise of e-voting involves different steps which generally include voter identification and authentication; voting and recording of votes cast; vote counting; and publication of election results. In Nigeria, for instance, electronic machines have been used to some extent in some of the electoral stages. These include the earlier registration of voters and the verification of voters' identities during voting process. All these constitute attempts towards the full adoption and implementation of e-voting system in Nigeria, without which the issue of vote buying will remain with the country. Although challenges were recorded as characterizing the implementations of the use of electronic machines, e-voting is viewed as a necessity based on its solution for credible elections.

In Nigeria, transition to e-voting adoption is not achievable without some possible challenges that need to be addressed for successful implementation. For instance, Ahmad et al. (2015) contend that there are numerous challenges of e-voting adoption in Nigeria such as: absence of legal framework; apprehension by electorates over the motives behind the proposed e-voting system; digital divides; low level computer literacy and technology phobia among the electorates; inadequate database of voters; inadequate requisite ICT infrastructure including electric power supply; inadequate technical and managerial capacity to handle sophisticated technology; loss of trust and confidence on the electoral officials; security and reliability of the technology. However, it is believed that the introduction, adoption and full implementation of e-voting has the likelihood to aid INEC in enhancing the veracity of the election result and save the institution from the public incessant allegation of colluding with the ruling party to engage in vote buying and manipulate election results. In the past and in an attempt to curb the allegations of all forms of irregularities during election days and post-election violence that have characterized Nigerian elections, confidence had placed in technology based on the adoption of Smart Card Reader Machine and Automated Permanent Voters Cards, all of which are not enough to address the issue of vote buying. Because the preliminary experiment of these aspects of voting technologies have seemingly proven their efficacy in combating election frauds, it is believed that this will further encourage the prospect for the development and adoption of a comprehensive e-voting machine in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The importance of e-voting system within the Nigerian context of electoral process and as a means of curbing vote buying has been emphasized in this study. Election has been discussed as an essential component of democracy, but it has remained weak and undeveloped in the country since the advent of democratic experimentation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic with the biggest challenges of transparent voting system and conducting elections that are free, fair, peaceful and credible as well as increasing phenomenon of vote buying. These concerns have

prompted this study to begin an advocacy for e-voting full adoption and implementation as a robust and practicable alternative panacea to poor electoral process and other electoral related challenges that characterize Nigerian voting system. Irrespective of its challenges, e-voting system is found as viable and a necessity in the quest to deepen electoral process and actual voting in Nigeria. The study suggests the following basic measures that should be taken into consideration in the course of introducing and adopting e-voting system:

i. In collaboration with INEC, there is need for Nigerian government to put in place appropriate measures for the full adoption of e-voting system towards 2023 general elections by making a provision for Automobile Electronic Voting Machines (AEVMs), which could be designed such that it would be able to accept a voter's Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) irrespective of the polling unit where a voter has been initially registered such that one can easily vote in any nearest Polling Unit (PU).

ii. The INEC, in addition to the introduction of Smart Card Reader Machine and Automated Permanent Voters Cards as aspects of an existing technology in the electoral process and as embedded in the recently signed Electoral Act, needs to ensure adequate security, convenience and confidentiality by applying serious caution in designing the technology so as avoid losing the public confidence in full e-voting system.

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