

Election Credibility Question in Nigeria: The Impact of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System and Media Representation in 2023 General Election

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Abstract

Typical Nigerian elections have been characterized by electoral malpractices prior to the year 2023. This has constituted worries to major Stakeholders as they sought to find a lasting remedy to the pitfall, especially through the use of modern technologies. The step enjoys constitutional leverage of the Nigerian Electoral Act 2010. Thus, this was complimented by heavy presence of media coverage of the election, as Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was adopted for the first time to salvage the integrity of the voting process and also to reduce electoral anomalies. The work examines the relationship between Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and Media coverage on the credibility of election in Nigeria with special reference to the 2023 gubernatorial election in Kwara State-Nigeria. The study adopts qualitative technique with descriptive analysis. Twelve (12) individuals were interviewed as key informants, four (4) per senatorial district. Findings show that Media representation and Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) boosted confidence of many voters in the election and its outcome, thus enhancing its credibility particularly in the case study area during the 2023 election. The study offers among other recommendations that; electoral body should work on system upgrade to permit sophisticated electronic voting in future elections, as well as collaborate for effective media representation to curry people's confidence in the election.

Keywords: Bimodal Voter Accreditation, Election credibility, Electronic voting, Media representation, Democracy.

Introduction

Election has been portrayed as a fundamental aspect of democracy, the absence of which no representative government can survive. By implication, free, fair and credible elections are central to democracy and provide a vital means of empowering citizens to hold their leaders accountable and to make the leader responsible. Election leads to the choice of decision makers by the majority of citizens. Election shows the extent to which a system is democratic.

According to Omotola (2010), an election is a method for filling a position or office through the choices made by electorates. Durotoye and Husaini (2016) noted that election is a course of choosing the officials or delegates of an association or gathering by the vote of its certified individuals. Aiyede (2007) considers election to be a challenge between contending ideological groups or individuals for government power. Credible elections are, therefore, a *sine qua non* for democratic governance, political stability and national development (Nkwachukwu and Nkiru, 2012). Election rigging, god-fatherism, ballot box snatching, voter intimidation, vote buying, underage voting, and falsification of results were among the electoral vices that characterized Nigerian elections prior to 2023.

It is against this backdrop that stakeholders sought to find solution to the anomaly by deploying technological provision. This step was backed by the Nigerian Electoral Act 2010 (Jega, 2014). Hence, for the first time in history of election in Nigeria, electronic voting was birthed during the 2015 general election with the introduction of smart card reading machine and subsequently replicated in 2019. In 2023 it came with some advancements in order to salvage the integrity of the voting process and also to reduce electoral anomalies, hence, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was introduced.

The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) is a form of e-voting electronic authentication device configured to read the Permanent Voter Cards issued by Nigeria's electoral umpire, Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC. This it does with the aid of biometric registration for voters and advanced finger prints identification system, which proves that they are eligible to vote at a particular polling unit. This study therefore seeks to examine the impact of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and its coverage by the Media on the credibility of election in Nigeria resting on the 2023 election in Kwara State as a case study.

Statement of the Problem

Since the adoption of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) by Nigeria's electoral umpire; Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), it was expected and believed that electoral frauds would have been issues of the past due to its utility to ensure credible elections. However, it seems that problems like; malfunctioning of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) at different polling units due to rejection of Permanent Voter Cards (PVC), inability to capture voters' biometrics from the finger tips, irregular capturing and early battery damage ostensibly caused by erratic power supply necessitated the ineffectiveness of the machine. For instance, it was reported by the Media, particularly by the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR, 2023) that, at Polling Unit 06, Oro, Irepodun Local Government Area, Kwara State, where the then serving Nigerian Minister of Information and Culture voted, the BVAS failed. Not only that, the malfunctioning of the machine was perceived to cause delay in voting and also prevented some voters from voting at the end of the day.

It was also reported by the Media that some members of the National Youth Service Corps who worked as Ad-hoc staff could not operate the e-voting machine properly during the 2023 elections. According to the Collation Officer for Yagba Local Government, in Kogi state, Dr. Alhassan Abdulrahman "some of the Ad-hoc staff could not operate the BVAS despite the intensive training they received from INEC" (The Guardian, 2023). Observers have questioned if the 2023 election in Nigeria and Kwara state in particular was free, fair and credible as per the basic ingredient of a credible election; inclusiveness, because some crops of the voting population were disenfranchised.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To assess the impact of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in the 2023 General election in the study area.
2. To examine how media coverage of the election particularly the use of BVAS influenced public perception and election credibility.

Research Proposition

0: There is no significant relationship between Bimodal Voter Accreditation System, Media representation and credibility of the 2023 election.

1: There is significant relationship between Bimodal Voter Accreditation System, Media representation and credibility of the 2023 election.

Conceptual Clarification

Election

Michael (2010) sees election as a process by which people select individuals to hold official positions. He went on to say that it is a well-known fact that elections only have significance in a democratic setting because they allow the majority of citizens to choose the decision-makers. Michael has neglected the fact that election also takes place in non-democratic societies like in Military and Monarchy system. Though election is synonymous to democracy and has meaning in it has meaning in it but not only in a democratic state do elections take place.

Election can also be seen as the act or process of choosing representative(s) to position of authority to represent the interest of the people in a particular defined area or territory (Alim 2015, Kwasau and Jacob 2015, Throup 1993, Ujo, 2004). This representation depicts that all cannot be at the helms of affairs and this makes election the heart of democratic settings. Nevertheless, election is not limited to the process of choosing a representative to public offices alone but also into private offices as well. Therefore, election can take place in any organization be it public or private. However, in the context of this study, election can be seen as the decision by qualified citizens to choose representatives into elective office.

Bimodal Voter Accreditation System

Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) is a portable electronic voter authentication gadget, designed to read the Permanent Voter Cards (PVC) which was planned explicitly for the certification interaction and verification of qualified electorate prior to casting a ballot. BVAS e-voting gadget requires scanning the barcode on the PVC/citizens' register or inputting the last six digits of the voter's identity number or inputting the last name of the voter by the electoral officer at the polling unit to verify the validity of the citizen. It can identify fake voter cards, verify original voter cards, and verify the voter's fingerprint; if the fingerprint is valid, it will accredit and grant access (INEC, 2021). It is said to be very simple to use, and when fully charged, it has a standby time of at least 12 hours. The most contentious issue in Nigeria's general elections over the past decade was the e-voting method (ICIR, 2019). One of the most groundbreaking innovations in Nigeria's electoral history, e-voting was first used in 2015.

Election Credibility

The conduct of credible elections in Nigeria since political independence has been exceedingly debatable and this is because having access to societal scarce resources is directly linked with public power. In many cases, those with public power determine how, where and when the scarce resources are to be distributed. Thus, stimulating the competition for public offices which admittance is officially determined by election.

At the meeting with INEC officials on July 31, 2014, the Commonwealth Secretary General said that a peaceful and credible election is the first step in any country's democratic process. He stated, "It is for that reason that we consider credible elections to be the 'heartbeat' of democracy, because citizens choose leaders who will represent them and make decisions on their behalf through elections." To corroborate the above expression, Alim (2015) argues that the heart of the democratic process is the conduct of free and credible elections, but when elections are not inclusive, democratic values and principles are destroyed. As a result, people lose faith in the results and structural disparities and inequalities worsen, which can lead to violence and even civil war. Brown (2009) posits that, for any political race to be valid, it should be portrayed by comprehensiveness, straightforwardness, responsibility and intensity. He believes that inclusive elections provide equal opportunities for all citizens to vote their representatives and candidates into office.

In driving home this point, Ejue and Ekanem, (2011) relate credible election in Nigeria with citizenship education. That is, credible election exists only if the citizens are educated about their right to vote. The government must also be able to protect this right. As a result of lack of knowledge of citizens' right to vote and be voted for, politicians easily manipulate the electorates and election outcome, thus popping up the question of election credibility from time to time.

Media Representation

Media Representation, interchangeably used as media coverage refers to the active involvement of media in reporting issues of public interest. When it is done wide awake it is called active representation, if it is otherwise, it is called passive representation. A study by Adagba and Okon (2019) analyzed the connection between media inclusion and general assessment in the 2015 Nigerian Presidential election race. According to the study, media representation essentially impacted general assessment, with media framing assuming a pivotal position in forming electors' discernments and decisions, thus addressing the objective

of examining how media coverage of the election particularly the use of BVAS influenced public perception and election credibility.

Theoretical framework

The research will rest on the Cybernetics Model of Communication theory and the Agenda Setting theory.

Cybernetics Model of Communication theory

American mathematician, Norbert Wiener has been credited with this theory sequel to his book titled “Cybernetics” published in 1948. Cybernetics is a science dealing with the general principles of information control and transfer in machines and living organisms or the control and communication in the animal and the machine (Norbert, 1948). Cybernetics Model of Communication theory is a theoretical tool for analyzing the role of Information and Communication Technology in socio-political engagement like election. The increasing complexity of the world has made the use of Information Communications Technology for administrative purposes a desideratum, this makes the Cybernetics model a basis for understanding electoral democracy. Cybernetic is a branch of science concerned with the study of systems of any nature which are capable of receiving, storing and processing information to aid human course. Varma (1975) argued that Cybernetics covers not only the versions of information theory but the theory of games, self-controlling machines, computers and the physiology of the nervous system. The Nigerian political system is a progressive unit of the human existence, in its bid to develop the pace of politics and the efficiency of administration and governance in Nigeria, Nigerian political system has ventured into the use of Technology-Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) -which is hitherto believed can improve electoral credibility.

Meanwhile, like every social science theory is not totally free from a particular weakness, the theory’s limitation lies in the fact that the communication channel is operated and handled by human being who are subject to partisanship and could be manipulated by imposing influence to compromise the system. The theory is however a perfect match for this study because it justifies the basis for the adoption of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) -an ICT device to enhance credibility in the 2019 electoral process in Nigeria and Kwara state in particular.

The Agenda Setting Theory

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw propounded the theory in the 1970s. The fundamental proposition of the theory is that the media exerts great influence on public opinion. This is because when information is disseminated through the media, it can twist broad perception of the people, mislead electorates during election, build or damage the trust that citizens have in democratic ideals. The Agenda Setting Theory also enables understanding of the ways in which information can influence democratic processes and mold public agenda in a way that is not originally intended. Since this work examines how media representation influences election credibility during the 2023 general election in Nigeria, the theory provides a framework for comprehending its possible effects on electoral outcomes, including maintaining public trust, consolidating political engagement, and strengthening the entire system. This is because people gain confidence with optimum coverage and sensitization about going to poll, compared to when it is under reported.

In spite of the criticism of the theory on the ground that it over simplify all media-societal issues to agenda settings for the public, it has assisted with grasping the intricate elements between the media and democratic processes particularly electoral outcomes. It also reveals insight into the ramifications for voting behaviour as well as its sustainability and credibility in Nigeria.

Methodology

The research design utilized is descriptive analytical. The essence of a qualitative design here is for evidence to be supported with logical analysis. Purposive sampling technique was used by the researcher and it cut across Kwara South, Kwara North and Kwara Central senatorial districts of Nigeria in the 2023 gubernatorial election. The purposive sampling technique helps to select respondents from each senatorial district. Thus, thematic technique was used to position issues raised into different theme of discourse.

Findings

Theme 1: In line with the first theme of this study, whether BVAS was of significant importance or not, the usage of BVAS in the 2023 general election in Nigeria was significantly impactful and in turn enhanced credible election. The findings of this study show that majority of the respondents in Kwara State were male between the age of 41 to 50, educated and employed, this shows that they were informed, matured and mindful adults who

knew what they were doing as they have transcended the stage of youth overzealousness. The responses from the interviews also affirmed this position as majority of the respondents asserted that BVAS had great significance in the election. This was evident in the responses from interviewees 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 9 as summarized below.

Interviewee 1: Yes, BVAS helped to block double voting.

Interviewee 2: Yes, BVAS had effect because majority of the voters in 2023 election were focused on the credibility.

Interviewee 3: Yes, BVAS had great significance in the election because it prevented some level of rigging.

Interviewee 6: Yes, it rendered accreditation authentic and voting trustworthy.

Interviewee 7: Yes, it was used to validate permanent voter cards.

Interviewee 9: Yes, it was transparent.

It was said by one of the interviewees that it blocked and put an end to multiple voting and this showed that if the gains of BVAS can be developed and consolidated, there will be more voter turnout and more respect for the decisions of the masses by the Nigerian political leaders. Although, interviewees 4, 5 and 8 had contrary view as BVAS had no significance in 2023 general election. Their expressions are summarized below.

Interviewee 4: No, BVAS was of no significance in the 2023 election in Kwara State because there were many complaints about the machine and even the machine did not work in some area that I visited.

Interviewee 5: No, it was unable to capture my finger print and Permanent Voter's Card.

Interviewee 8: No, some electorates were accredited manually.

The findings here reveal some electorates were accredited manually which if not properly addressed will reduce the potency and integrity people have in the BVAS.

Theme 2: The second theme focused on BVAS's ability to eradicate electoral fraud in 2023 election. Majority of the interviewees (1, 2,3,6,8, and 9) agreed to the assertion. Nevertheless, those who disagreed (interviewees 4 & 5) gave the following expression:

Interviewee 4: No, because there is always alternative to the machine which is manual accreditation.

Interviewee 5: No, there was still rigging but majority says there is no rigging because it was their choice that was totally elected.

Meanwhile, Interviewee 7 stands in between: partially, even without BVAS there will still be electoral fraud.

From the above statements, it is pertinent to state that Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was not able to eradicate electoral fraud totally but to a greater extent it was able to minimize it.

Theme 3: On the third theme which sought to know if Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was the reason behind people's turn out to vote, almost all the interviewees disagreed to the statement that people do not come out to vote because they do not believe in BVAS. Only interviewee 2 had a contrary opinion.

Interviewee 2: Yes, they (people) believed the election will still go the same way. Thus, BVAS was not the reason for people's turn out during the 2023 general election in Kwara State- Nigeria.

There is limited literature on the impact of BVAS as per credible election in Nigeria. INEC has argued that BVAS had a standby time of not less than 12 hours if fully charged. This is contrary to the findings that some BVAS malfunctioned as a result of erratic power supply to the device during the 2023 gubernatorial election in Kwara state.

Theme 4: The fourth theme focused on whether INEC Ad-hoc staff were well trained in handling the BVAS during the 2023 gubernatorial election in Kwara State. Grippingly, eight out of the nine interviewees affirmed that all the INEC ad-hoc staff used during the 2023 gubernatorial election were well trained. Their responses are summarized below.

Interviewee 1: Yes, I was paid as at when due but I learnt more at the polling unit.

Interviewee 3: Yes, they handled and operated it perfectly well.

Interviewee 4: Yes, the Ad hoc staff were well trained. INEC is generally doing well.

Interviewee 5: Yes, they were trained but BVAS did not work

Interviewee 6: Yes, the INEC Ad-hoc staff were well trained because they handled the BVAS perfectly.

Interviewee 7: Yes, because there were no complains about them.

Interviewee 8: Yes, they were well trained in the way they handled the BVAS and majority of the electorates had no issue about them.

Interviewee 9: Yes, if not they would not be able to handle the BVAS well.

Meanwhile, interviewee 2 had a contrary opinion about the INEC Ad-hoc staff.

Interviewee 2: No, the ad-hoc staff were not proactive because some of those that were trained were later short-changed with non-trained personnel on the eve of election due to the influence of the latter.

This opinion reckons with a media report by Sahara Reporters (2023) that the ad-hoc staff could not properly identify the ballot boxes and their positions.

However, the stated findings are in contrast to this insinuation stipulated by a section of the media. In summary, the issue related to INEC ad-hoc staff posed by the majority of the interviewees shows that they were well trained and this is evident in the way they composed themselves doing the electoral processes. Therefore, the level of training given to INEC's Ad-hoc staff prior to the 2023 gubernatorial election in Kwara state enhanced the credibility of the election.

Theme: 5: On whether Media representation contributed to the credibility of election.

Studies conducted by Graber (2004), Lawal (2019) and Okorie (2021) affirm the connection between the outcomes of elections and media coverage. Scholars such as McCombs and Shaw (1972) have emphasized the media's agenda-setting function, suggesting that the public's priorities and perceptions are significantly influenced by the issues they highlight. Similarly, Media framing theory, as proposed by Roberts (1993), states that the manner in which media frames political events and candidates impact general assessment and citizens' decisions.

The above scholarly assertions were corroborated by the interview feedbacks of all respondents that the media aided the credibility of the 2023 general election in Nigeria, except for respondent eight who believed that the media did not impact the election in terms of credibility.

Interviewee 8: In the words of interviewee eight; No, the media presence has nothing to do with the voters turn out, neither the outcome or credibility of the election. The, media was not the reason for people's turn out during the 2023 general election in Kwara State- Nigeria. It is just that people are tired of the government, some people also came out to vote because they don't like the muslim-muslim ticket at the Presidential level. So, with or without media hype or whatever name you call it, people will still come out to vote. In fact, some media were bias and promoting the interest of some politicians rather than the electoral institution itself, therefore, they can never be said to have promoted credible election.

The above respondent cited examples of media houses believed by him to be bias in the coverage of the 2023 general election in Nigeria. However, for ethical reason, their names will not be captured in this study. Meanwhile, the study is bent to be convinced based on majority feedbacks from the interviewees that media presence could have aided the credibility of the election.

Theme 6: The last theme sought to know whether 2023 general election was free, fair and credible. According to the responses, eight out of nine of the respondents agreed that 2023 gubernatorial election in Kwara State was free, fair and credible. Some of the responses are summed up as follows:

Interviewee 1: Yes, based on what I saw in my polling unit, the election was credible.

Interviewee 2: Yes, Majority of the voters were able to go for who they wanted.

Interviewee 3: Yes, 2023 election in Kwara State was free, fair and credible.

Interviewee 5: Yes, the candidate with the majority votes was elected. No malpractices.

Interviewee 6: Yes, it was credible, free and fair.

Interviewee 7: Yes, it was free but not totally fair and credible because causalities were recorded during a dispute between party loyalists in my polling unit.

Interviewee 8: Yes, in Kwara state what I witnessed was a credible election.

Interviewee 9: Yes, it was free and fair because there was no fight in my area unlike before.

Nevertheless, an interviewee had different opinion from others. Interviewee 4 posited that “No, the election was not free, fair and credible because the electoral umpire, INEC, at a time claimed it was unable to access the server but latter it denied it. Thus, essence of BVAS without the server that will make it accessible for people is questionable. Nevertheless, in general term, majority of the respondents agreed that 2023 general election was credible.

Discussion

Election has become a globalized heritage of democracy that societies struggle to take pride in, especially when it is periodic, free, fair and credible. In Nigeria, conducting credible election has been the challenge of successive administration, hence putting the question of a sane democratic clime to bear. In recent time, the Nigerian government attempted to make a positive difference by deploying technological input to the conduct of election. This underscores the choice of this research to examine the impact of Bimodal Voter Accreditation

System (BVAS) and Media representation in the conduct of the 2023 general election in Nigeria as per electoral credibility.

Using the cybernetics model of communications and the agenda setting theories, it was discovered that the deployment of BVAS and its wide Media coverage added to the confidence many voters had in the election and its outcome. Though, the use of BVAS and media coverage did not entirely make the election free and fair, but both contributed to its credibility. Despite challenges, especially in fingerprint verification and malfunctioning of internet servers, the BVAS contributed to curbing pervasive electoral fraud like multiple usage of PVC, impersonation and other electoral malpractices, while the wide media presence accorded it boosted people's confidence on the election and its outcomes.

The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) has reformed Nigerian election race. Today's evidence demonstrates that, for the first time in national history, the ballot made a difference in the political fortunes of the least expected, such as a commercial motorcyclist running for the House of Representatives, and the political misfortunes of the wealthy, who lost. The votes were counted, and the powerful were defeated by the people's rapier because the votes counted more than ever before. This underscores why incumbent governors and senators lost their strongholds in the 2023 general election, including the presidential and national assembly elections as well as the elections for state and local assemblies. The unanticipated occurred because people's votes were more important than wealth or power. As an example, the incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari lost his state. The President-elect, Ahmed Bola Tinubu, viewed as the landlord of Lagos State, lost his state. Plateau State Governor and Director-General of Tinubu's campaign organization, Simon Lalong lost his state. The people were able to freely decide the fate of their political leaders because their decision on the ballot paper counted. Has something similar transpired prior to 2023? The BVAS has for sure turned into a powerful force to deal with in Nigeria's authority enlistment process where individuals' votes count, and individuals can presently not be treated like a helpless garbage. Nigerians are shifting away from a government of the powerful and influential towards a government that is freely chosen and established by the people as the BVAS served as an embankment against massive election rigging.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Credible election anywhere in the world is a co-efficacy of multiple factors like transparency and accountability. While the BVAS assures transparency, the media presence offers accountability. The effective coordination of both proffers enduring and credible election. This underpins the decision of the Nigerian government under Muhammadu Buhari to leave a living legacy behind in the form of credible election. For the first time in Nigerian history, the government in power went extra mile to put in place mechanisms that can cause political suicide for party stalwarts and oppositions alike, in the name of enthroning credible election. The electoral body was not stopped on its move to adopt BVAS to conduct the 2023 election, despite knowing its consequences. This bold move, though had some negative consequences on the politicians themselves as noted above, it has definitely boosted the confidence of the citizens and the international community on Nigeria's ability to conduct credible election. This was grossly attested to by majority of the respondents as well, in this study.

The study therefore recommends that; there is need to ensure the challenges that arose from the use of the BVAS do not reoccur in any future election; electoral umpire should carry out a test-run and simulation of every electoral materials before the election proper; training and retraining of electoral body's staff and ad-hoc staff on effective use of the election instrument should be consistent from time to time; provision should be made for experienced and resourceful technicians and backup electoral materials to serve as the alternative plan in case the first plan fails to work at the polling units during election; electoral umpire should work on upgrading the system to permit advancement in electronic voting (e-voting) in future elections. Depending on the degree of automation, functions of e-voting include voters' registration, voters' authentication, voters' input, counting, voter data encryption and direct transmission of results to server from the polling units-which was a major challenge for INEC in the last election, all these essentials of e-voting if effected, stand tall to improve electoral outcomes and credibility of future elections in the country.

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