Impact of Voter Electronic Device on Electoral Credibility: Role of the Card Reader in the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

Political gladiators and other stakeholders are generally perceived to have viewed the card reader as having played a controversial role in the 2015 general elections. The smart card reader was a critical component in the elections. It was used for the first time in the electoral process in Nigeria and remains one of the greatest technological innovations of the 2015 general elections. The smart card reader is a technological device setup to authenticate and verify on Election Day a Permanent Voter Card (PVC) issued by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The fundamental basis for the deployment of the technologically-based device by INEC was to ensure credible, transparent, free and fair elections in order to deepen Nigeria's democracy. However, the use of the card reader generated debate among the election stakeholders before, during and after the elections. Chief among was the legality of the use of the device. This paper examines the debate and the role of the card reader in the 2015 general elections. The paper also looks at the challenges and impact of the card reader on the elections. The paper argues that considering the massive electoral fraud witnessed in most general elections since Nigeria's independence, the card reader played a key role in legitimizing the 2015 elections. Consequently, the paper recommends that subsequent general elections in Nigeria should gradually continue to be technologically driven, with electronic voting as the end point.

Keywords*:* democracy, elections, electoral democracy, electoral fraud, smart card reader, permanent voter card, technology.

Introduction

The use of voter card readers during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria infused some level of transparency and credibility into Nigeria's electoral process (Banire, 2015). When the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) first announced its plan to introduce the card reader device for the March 28 and April 11 2015 general elections, many Nigerians, especially politicians, vehemently opposed it. They felt the country had not developed to a level where such technology could be employed for elections. Besides, they felt the use of card readers would disrupt the entire electoral process.

The public outcry that greeted the planned introduction of card reader machines was enough to discourage INEC from introducing it. However, because INEC had confidence in the efficacy of modern technologies in delivering quick results, coupled with its vision to transform the country's electoral process from its old undemocratic norms that were characterized by ballot box snatching and multiplicity of ballot thumb-printing, INEC went ahead and introduced the technology against all odds (Vanguard, 2015). The 2015 presidential election appears to be the most keenly contested in the history of elections in Nigeria because it was the first time about four major opposition parties came together to form a very strong opposition party, the All Progressives

Congress (APC), in order to challenge the dominance of the ruling party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), in general elections. Indeed, according to Amenaghawon (2015), the elections 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, for instance, biometric Register of Voters and Advanced Fingerprints Identification System were embarked upon by the new leadership headed by Prof. Attahiru Jega of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the election management body empowered by the 1999 Construction (as amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to organize, undertake and supervise all elections in Nigeria. Concerned about the massive electoral fraud witnessed in the previous general elections in Nigeria since independence, INEC's deployment of the card reader in 2015 general elections was to ensure a credible, transparent, free and fair election in order to deepen Nigeria's electoral democracy. However, the use of the electronic device created a fierce debate among election stakeholders before, during and after the elections.

Statement of the Problem

The 2015 general elections, with the presidential election as the crown was the closest electoral contest since the country's post-1999 transition to multi-party democracy (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2015). The election was the most politically engaged in the history of electoral democracy in Nigeria. Huge resources used for the elections included 120 billion naira expended by INEC, 750,000 ad-hoc election staff with over 360,000 security personnel including the use of card readers to ensure credibility and transparency (Vanguard, 2015).

The paper is aimed at examining the effect of card readers on the elections in Nigeria, and some of the controversies generated such as: the card reader rejected thumb-print of voters in many instances (which raises the issue of how many were denied their fundamental right to vote, there was no large scale expertise to handle the card readers in instances where they malfunctioned (which raised the issue of the level of legitimacy of the vote), the card reader was not durable due to power failure in many polling units, the card reader wasted a lot of time during the accreditation of voters in the polling units and did all these have an influence on the final outcome in terms of transparency, legitimacy and acceptability? All these will be interrogated in this paper.

Research Questions

i. What is the effect of card readers on election credibility in Nigeria?
ii. What is the reliability of the card reader during the electoral process?
iii. What are the limitations in the use of the card reader for elections in Nigeria?
iv. What is the viability of the card reader for future elections, and how could that create the path to electronically driven elections in the country?

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the effect of card readers on the elections' credibility and legitimacy.
2. To evaluate the reliability of the card reader during the electoral process.
3. To determine the viability of the card reader for future elections in Nigeria.
4. To make recommendations on the way forward to electronically driven elections in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Role Theory

According to George and Jacob (1980), quoted in Dunne (2006), Role theory is a perspective in sociology and in social psychology that considers most of everyday activity to be the acting out of socially defined categories (i.e. mother, manager, teacher), that each social role is a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms and behaviours that a person has to face and fulfil.

The model is based on the observation that people behave in a predictable way, and that an individual behaviour is context specific, based on social position and other factors. The theatre is a metaphor often used to describe role theory.

Substantial debate exists in the field over the context of the "role" in role theory. A role can be defined as a social position or behaviour associated with a position or a typical behaviour. The theory puts forward the idea that role essentially outlines expectations about how an individual or organization ought to behave in a given situation. Others have suggested that a role is a characteristic behaviour or expected behaviour a part to be played or a script for social conduct.

Elections and Election Credibility

Election is the process of choosing a candidate for public office. Election is a critical component 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, 2015). The 2015 general election appears to be the most keenly contested in the history of elections in Nigeria because it was the first time about four major opposition parties came together to form a very strong opposition party to challenge a ruling party.

Ebhomele (2015) stressed that there are four major variables on which the concept of free and fair elections rests. These are:

i. political parties
ii. voters
iii. voting process
iv. elections outcome

Overview of the Card Reader in the 2015 General Elections

The Card Reader was the most highly contentious issue in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. It was a critical component in the 2015 general elections which was used for the first time in Nigeria's electoral process. It remains one of the greatest innovative technologies in the electoral process in Nigeria.

Past elections in Nigeria had witnessed the desperate bid for political power by some 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 led to legal actions, electoral conflicts and violence.

Electoral malpractices make the citizens to lose confidence in the electoral process; and lack of confidence by the citizenry in the democratic process is an impediment in deepening electoral democracy. **If** the citizenry do not believe in the fairness, accuracy, openness, and integrity of the election process, the very basis of any democratic society might be threatened (Alvarez and Hall, 2008).

Electoral fraud, according to Lopez-Pinter (2010), quoted in Peters (2015) has more serious political implications, in that it allows a party or candidate to take over public political offices contrary to the popular will. This undermines the democratic process and usually leads to electoral violence, insecurity and political instability. For instance, the governments of Cote d'Ivoire and Serbia all fell in the year 2000 as a result of popular rebellions against fraudulent elections. Similarly, the so called "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004 caused presidential elections to be completely re-run after extensive fraud was uncovered (Lopez-Pintor, 2010 quoted in Peters 2015).

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 the strategies to combat electoral malpractices is the introduction of information and communication technology procedures and devices into the electoral process. The use of technology in elections is not an end in itself, but assists in the various aspects of electoral administration (ACE Project, 2019). It is against this background that an electronic based device the Card Reader was introduced into the Nigerian electoral process in 2015 to help improve and deepen democracy.

The 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 INEC 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 very useful in validating the authenticity of voters as against the previous syndrome of fake voters (Engineering Network Team, 2015).

A major fundamental basis for the deployment of the technologically-based device in the 2015 general elections by INEC was the objective to prevent electoral fraud; to allow the electorate's 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; and to ensure transparency and accountability. Others are to do a range of statistical analysis of the demographics of voting for the purposes of research and planning; 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 (Electoral Institute, 2015).

Despite the challenges that confronted the operation of some of the Card Readers during the 2015 general elections, a significant impact of the device usage was observed in the course of the elections. First, the use of the 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 (Vanguard, 2015). Many Nigerians after the elections believed that their votes counted (which was concurred with by many respondents who filled this research questionnaire), and as such their will could be respected in future elections; and this had reinforced the legitimacy of Nigerians in the democratic process. Secondly, electoral fraud was reduced. Inflation of the number of voters present and multiple voting at polling station were reduced. The device checked the undemocratic practices of politicians in fuelling electoral malpractices.

Thirdly, election litigations were minimized. There was a departure from the past where every election outcome is being contested at the election tribunal. Most of the candidates that lost in the 2015 general elections did not challenge the outcome. In fact, some of the major contenders that did not win in the election embraced and congratulated the winners. For instance, the PDP presidential candidate immediately congratulated the APC presidential candidate, the winner of the presidential election. This development was replicated across many states of the federation in the governorship, house of assembly and national assembly elections (Vanguard, 2015). In addition, electoral conflicts and violence was very minimal as the election was seen to be transparent and credible due to the use of the card reader. The usually excessive bickering between the election winners and losers in past electoral contests was significantly reduced.

In view of the minimal level of electoral fraud due to the use of the card reader, tensions were reduced among the political gladiators, and as such, electoral conflicts and violence were grossly diminished in the 2015 general elections compared to past elections in Nigeria (Electoral Institute, 2015). Furthermore, Nigeria's democratic capacity has increased and its democratic institutions strengthened. Nigeria's democratic institutions have been able to incrementally develop a capacity for organizing free and fair elections, a useful step in deepening the democratic process.

Card Reader, Electronic Technology Devices and Future Elections in Nigeria

The introduction of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) devices, procedures and processes into the electoral process is generating both interest and concern among voters and practitioners across the globe. Today, most electoral management bodies (EMBs) around the world use new technologies with the aim of improving the electoral process (ACE project, 2019). These technological software and devices including the Card Reader should however be deployed in a manner that will lead to their effectiveness, encouraging transparency and acceptability among stakeholders.

No doubt, the Card Reader played a very significant role in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. However, there is the need to ensure that the issues and challenges which confronted the use of the device before, during and after the elections do not reoccur in future elections. Therefore, a number of mechanisms are being suggested by stakeholders to be in place by INEC for the deployment of the card reader in future elections so as to strengthen the democratic process (Electoral, Institute, 2015).

INEC is being encouraged to ensure that its conduct and activities in future elections are made more transparent with the use of technology similar to the card reader. This is because transparency is a key principle in the conduct of credible elections; and this will bring about trust and public confidence in the electoral process. Also, INEC according to some of the respondents, needs to carryout effective campaigns on any other technologies to be deployed in future elections before their actual deployment to avoid the kind of controversy that greeted the card reader when the idea was first mooted.

Methodology

Sample Size/Sampling Technique

The sample size of this study was 30 respondents which comprised of male and female adults of voting age (18 years and above). This is a random sampling representation of 30 registered voters in the Abuja Municipal Council (AMAC) within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT).

Data Presentation and Analysis

Data presentation and analysis is made in tabular form and frequency of responses calculated in percentages as shown below:

Table 1: Category of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	20	66.7	66.7	66.7
Female	10	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.00	

Source: Field Survey 2019

Table 1 above shows the gender distribution of the respondents used for this study. Out of the total number of 30 respondents, 20 respondents, which represent 66.7 percent of the population, are male. 10 which represent 33.3 percent of the population are female.

Table 2: Was the card reader a reliable machine during the elections?

Opinion	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	8	26.7	26.7	26.7
Agree	15	50.0	50.0	76.7
Disagree	4	13.3	13.3	90.0
Strongly disagree	3	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey2019

From the Table, about 8 respondents which represent 26.7 percent of the population strongly agreed. 15 representing 50.0 percent of the population agreed. 4 which represent 13.3 percent of the population disagree. 3 which represent 10.0 percent of the population strongly disagreed.

Table 3: Were there limitations in the use of the card reader for the elections significant enough to have constituted impediments to the elections' acceptability and legitimacy?

Opinion	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	10	33.3	33.3	33.3
Agree	5	16.7	16.7	50.0
Disagree	5	16.7	16.7	66.7
Strongly disagree	10	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey 2019

Table 3 curiously shows that half of the respondents believe there were impediments that were unhelpful to the credibility and legitimacy of the elections arising from the use of the card reader. While, the other half do not think there were any significant limitations.

Table 4: Do you think that the 2015 general elections were credible largely due to the card reader?

Opinion	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	CumulativePercent
Strongly agree	5	16.7	16.7	16.7
Agree	15	50.0	50.0	66.7
Strongly disagree	8	26.7	26.7	93.3
Disagree	2	6.7	6.7	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey 2019

Over 80% of respondents affirmed that the 2015 elections were credible on account of the use of the card reader. While, less than 20% do not think so.

Table 5: Is there a significant relationship between the use of card readers and the credibility, acceptability and the peaceful outcome of the 2015 general elections?

Opinion	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	5	16.7	16.7	16.7
Agree	17	56.7	56.7	73.3
Strongly disagree	2	6.7	6.7	80.0
Disagree	4	13.3	13.3	93.3
Undecided	2	6.7	6.7	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey 2019

Table 5 indicates that 73.4% of respondents believe that the credibility, acceptability and largely peaceful outcome of the 2015 elections, particularly the presidential elections, are credited to the use of the card reader by the electoral management body.

Table 6: Do you support the view that card readers helped to minimize election rigging in Nigeria?

Opinion	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	CumulativePercent
Strongly Agree	5	16.7	16.7	16.7
Agree	12	40.0	40.0	56.7
Undecided	5	16.7	16.7	73.3
Disagree	4	13.3	13.3	86.7
Strongly disagree	4	13.3	13.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey 2019

56.7% of the stakeholders affirm that the card reader greatly minimized rigging in that election.

Hypotheses

H_0: There is no significant relationship between the use of card readers and the credibility of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria.

H_1: There is a significant relationship between the use of card readers and the credibility of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria.

Level of significance: 0.05

Decision Rule: Reject the null hypothesis if the p-value is less than the level of significance, accept the null hypothesis if otherwise.

Table 7: Test of Statistics

	There is a significant relationship between the use of card readers and credibility of the 2015 general elections
Chi-square	26.333^0
Df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 6.0

Conclusion based on the decision rule:

Since the p-value (0.000) is less than the level of significance, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a significant relationship between the use of the card readers and the credibility of the general elections in Nigeria.

Table 8: Paired Sample Correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
pair 1: the card reader was a reliable electoral device during the elections and the 2015 general elections was credible largely due to the use of the card reader	30	.781	.000

Table 9: Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
the card reader was a reliable electoral device during the 2015 general elections, and that was credible largely due to the card reader	0.067	.828	.151	-242	.376	.441	29	.000

Table 8 shows that there is a strong positive relationship between the use of card readers and the credibility of the general elections in Nigeria, and this can be obtained from the Pearson correlation coefficient "r" of 0.781.

Table 9 reveals that the *t* test analysis conducted indicated that there is a significant relationship between the card reader as a reliable electoral device and the success of the 2015 general elections owing to the reliability of the card readers. This can be seen because the *p*-value being 0.000 is less than the level of significance**.**

Conclusion

INEC's insistence on the use of the card reader and PVC passed the integrity test and must be commended. On the basis of the test and assurances which made the Commission to overcome the limitations and some of the hiccups which occurred during the elections, the subsequent elections went on fairly well. There were issues of non-recognition of the thumb print of some voters, the delay in the activation, and absence of alternative power supply to power the batteries, and to make the devices active where they were reported to have malfunctioned. It should be noted that the exercise was fairly successful. INEC officials performed their duties and functions in a professional manner in collaboration with security personnel. Only minimal friction was recorded between INEC officials and the voters, they were aggrieved over the hiccups generated by the device, and clearly, the voters fully embraced the card reader technology and cooperated with INEC officials.

In order to secure Nigeria's democratic process and future in free and fair elections, registered voters, political parties, faith based organizations, other civic groups, and indeed, all stakeholders are enjoined to relentlessly continue in the implementation of programmes aimed at sensitizing their supporters and the public on the need to embrace an electronic technology driven electoral process as vital for safeguarding Nigeria's return to civil rule and democratic growth.

INEC should endeavour to manage information about the technology and changes so that stakeholders do not have unrealistic expectations and do not impose impossible deadlines. These

stakeholders can be engaged to make rules and regulations on the electoral process. The need to strengthen the electoral law in conformity to the technology deployed for future elections is germane. Without pre-empting the recommendations, the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) could be amended to make the use of the card reader for biometric verification of voters compulsory for the purpose of accreditation in future elections. Therefore, the new National Assembly could quickly be approached by INEC to amend the electoral legal frameworks on the use of card reader (to be reflected in an amended Electoral Act) in order to address the issue of legality which the card reader had generated. It is a new term and very early in the day for the law to be tinkered with as the 2023 elections are still a few years ahead.

Furthermore, adequate training of election officials (both temporary and permanent staff) of INEC could be spread incrementally and in phases ahead of time before the 2023 elections so as to give room for practical demonstration of how to manage an electronically driven electoral process. INEC should regularly update and re-examine the relevance of the card reader and other electronic devices to be deployed in future elections in Nigeria, because technology is not static and the level of technological change is so rapid such that every device needs to be constantly updated for it to remain relevant always. Therefore, to conduct a credible, transparent, free and fair election in the future with the use of the card reader or any other electronic electoral device, INEC as an electoral management body, could be advised to invest in regular staff training and development in order to be in tune with the constantly changing dynamic in technological changes as every election cycle approaches. Consequently, future general elections in Nigeria should gradually continue to be technologically driven.

Recommendations:

1. INEC should intensify its efforts on voter education and other civic education strategies that would fully educate the citizens about any electronic voter device that may be put in use in any general elections, do a test run with voter participation, with a view to addressing all concerns by stakeholders ahead of their deployment.
2. To address the issue of malfunction and unavailability of card readers on Election Day, INEC is advised to provide back-up via alternative power supply, additional card readers and batteries. Card Readers readily available and accessible on Election Day will definitely help to avoid unnecessary delay in the accreditation process.
3. A seamless accreditation process that ensures every eligible voter does not lose his/her fundamental human right to vote because of technical hitches will greatly raise the level of acceptability and legitimacy of the elections.
4. INEC should develop a process of dealing with the issue of discrepancies of details on the PVC and the Card Reader in a way that the Card Reader can be reconfigured in a timely manner so as to avoid disenfranchisement of any voter.
5. INEC should work on processes and options that will facilitate and fine-tune the biometric authentication process.
6. Adequate provision for transportation must be made for INEC staff especially in the rural areas as delay in deployment of staff and materials on Election Day have caused delay in the conduct of elections with implications for the final outcome- legitimacy and acceptability.

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