THE ROLE OF CARD READER IN CONDUCTING CREDIBLE ELECTION IN THE 2015 NIGERIA’S GENERAL ELECTION

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Abstract
For over the years Nigeria is facing with the lingering problem of election rigging and manipulation from the politicians in which the people vote is not counted and this resulted to the serious crisis during the post-election period. The introduction of card reader in the process of election in Nigeria has made a significant impact in sensitizing the electoral process as well as reduction in electoral fraud. The process was highly appreciated and generates a lot of interest from the stakeholders. It also gives a holistic confidence to the Nigeria’s electoral body (INEC). The application of card reader has yielded a positive result in consolidating democracy in Nigeria especially the voter’s accreditation process, authentication of the registered voters and control of election malpractices-multiple voting system. The study adopted Documentary method. The data for the study was generated from secondary sources. The study finds out that even the INEC/ Ad-hoc staffs were not well trained in the operation of the card reader effectively. Therefore, the study recommended that there is need for the government to improve in the enlightenment and awareness campaign through voter education and invest in appropriate human capacity on the use of smart card reader. Innovation should not be fully embraced but e-voting be incorporated into Nigeria’s electoral system as a panacea for electoral fraud. Section 52 of the Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended) which prohibits e-voting should be amended in order to make its adoption statutorily possible

Keywords: Election, Free and Fair, Credibility and Card Reader.

Introduction
Election is the systematic way of allowing the public or citizens to choose leaders into public office, through the use of electoral process which is guided, organized, conducted and monitored by the authorized electoral body. It is also an act of choosing or selecting candidate who will represent the people of country in a parliament or other government positions. It is therefore, a process through which people choose their leaders and indicate their policies and programmed preferences and consequently invest a government with authority to rule, (Dunne, 2014).
It is also an integral part of democratic process that enables the citizens to determine fairly and freely who should lead them at every level of government periodically and take decision that shape their economic and political destiny. Elections are 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 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. Therefore, APC is the conglomeration of different political parties came together in order to kick PDP out of government and they have succeeded in doing so. Prior to the 2015 general elections, a number of technologically based reforms were embarked upon by the new leadership of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), headed by Prof Attahiru Jega. These included the biometric register of voters and an advanced fingerprint identification system. INEC is the election management body empowered by the 1999 Constitution (as amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to organise, undertake and supervise all elections in Nigeria. INEC is the election management body empowered by the 1999 Constitution (as amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to organise, undertake and supervise all elections in Nigeria. With the introduction of smart card reader, INEC went ahead to implement the use of card readers for the 2015 general elections. INEC officials were trained on the use of card reader and the machines were supplied to all polling units across the country. During the elections, INEC insisted on the use of card readers for accreditation across all polling units and the machines were actually used for accreditation. Although they were successfully used in some polling units, some had challenges, which INEC attributed to both technical and human errors.

**Statement of the Problem**

For over the years Nigeria is facing with the lingering problem of election rigging and manipulation from the politicians in which the people vote is not counted and this resulted to the serious crisis during the 2011 post-election period. Card reader was introduced during the 2015 general election in order to ensure credible free and fair election. Since the return of democracy in 1999, efforts has been made by the government on how to solve the problems of election rigging and other forms of election malpractice. Over 200 billion naira was spent from 1999 to 2011 on how to improve the electioneering process in Nigeria but this objective has not been achieved. Stakeholders in Nigeria engaged in all forms of electoral malpractices like multiple voting, impersonation, manipulation and falsification of results, electoral conflicts and violence which make government to established Election Tribunal in order to attend to issues of election irregularities. 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 because 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.

**Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of the study is to find out the role of card reader in conducting credible election in the 2015 general election. Other specific objectives include:

1. To find out how the use of card reader reduced election rigging in 2015 general election.
2. To find out the ways of how to improve card reader during election in Nigeria.
3. To find out the role of card reader in authenticating a duly registered voter.

**Research Question**

1. To what extent has the use of card reader reduced election rigging during the 2015 general election?
2. In what ways can we improve the use of card reader during election in Nigeria?
3. What is the role of card reader in authenticating a duly registered voter?

Free, Fair and Credible Election
Election is one of the key component in ensuring democracy because it enhance citizens participation in governance, ensure government accountability and encourage political competition, the free, fair and credible election is one of the basic and crucial prerequisites and element of democratic government and governance. The election would be credible, when rules, regulations and laws governing the electoral process will be followed by and ultimately, the credible candidate will be freely and fairly elected to represent the electorate. According to Diamond (2002), the free and fair elections have four (4) major components, these are:

(i) Independent political parties will compete in electoral process in freely and fairly;
(ii) Individual must be free to participate in politics and election process based on their own choice;
(iii) The election process would be free and fair so that every adult franchise can apply their voting right with equal weight; and
(iv) The outcome of the election or counting vote would be accurate and legitimate.

Thus, when the all the four variables mentioned above will be available in the process, conduct and outcome of an election, that election could be considered to be free, fair and credible. Therefore, free, fair and credible election means most of the political parties will have the opportunity to participate in all the national and local elections without any fear and hindrance. This type of election offers absolute peoples’ participation without any fear and domination of any parties to elect their chosen candidates. To ensure transparency and credibility, both national and international press media and election observers and evaluate the election process.

Hence, free and fair elections mean universal and equal access to the electoral process and to ballots which are secret and free. This requires an absence of fraud and threats and that votes are applied fairly into elections in a transparent manner and in accordance with a law.

From the above discussion, the following general features of free, fair and credible election have been identified:

a. An effective legal framework;
b. To ensure equal voting rights of universal franchise;
c. Direct secret voting system;
d. Electoral commission (INEC) would be independent;
e. Security of voters must be ensured before and after the election;
f. The fair play of an election administration;
g. Competitive election among all parties;
h. Access to media and election observers in election process;
i. Counting votes accurately;
j. Theoretical Framework

k. The study adopted Elite Theory. Elite is propounded by such Political Scientist like Mills (1956) and Parry Geraint (1969). The key tenet of the theory is that the elite, who are few in the society share common values, have more resources viz, power, education, wealth etc., and hold leading and strategic positions in the society while masses are atomised, not organised for concert action, lack resources and politically incompetent and inert. It is the elite who are few that dominate the policy process and shape public policy. The diagram below portrays a pyramidal structure of the society with a somewhat separated upmost part constituting the ruling elite. In between the two parts of the triangle is the policy output and an arrow depicting that it is the separate topmost part of the pyramid (society) that impacts on policy. The desperate lower part of the pyramid represents the masses that have little or no impact on policy outcome.

l. The elite are not necessarily those in government but are found in all sectors of the society acting from behind the scene, tele-guiding and manipulating political power and policies (Ujo, 1994). In his book “The political Elites (1996)”, Geraint postulates that Public Policy reflects the values and preferences of the elites, rather than the demands of the masses. Policy reflects the values and preferences of the elites rather than the demands of the masses. Policy flows downward from the elite to the mass (Henry, 2007). The elite theory admits some degree of recruitment to the class of elites from the masses but maintains that this is gradual and that those so admitted accept the elite consensus so as to maintain stability in the society. The theory presumes that the elites consensus is based on class interest but admits some degree of paternalism and altruism to the masses for the purpose of maintaining the status quo. In other words, the elite theory does not entirely disagree with the fact that public policies can be to attenuate to the demands of the masses. Thus, public policy in most societies reflects and continues to reflect the values and preferences of the elites.
Because the elite have common interest in the preservation of the status quo in the society, policies are bound to be conservative, non-innovative and marginal, rather than those with bold and high change potentials. Policies might sometimes be in the masses interests, even though the long term interest may be that of the elites but this happens as concession to or reactions to the threats on the status quo by the masses (Ujo, 1994).

m. The elite theory explains ‘who’ of public policy but does not actually explain how the actual participation of the elites in the policy process is achieved especially as the elites are not found only in government. The theory however, subscribe to the Instrumentalist model of decision making since it does not accede to radical and innovative policies. With regards to this study the political elites especially from Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) which is ruling this country since the returned of democracy in 1999 engaged in all aspect of election malpractice in order to maintain their political seats and they had succeeded in doing that. Smart Card were introduced in 2015 General election in order to reduced the election malpractice and that is why the 2015 general election is regarded as the most successful election in the history of the country.

The Impact of Card Reader
The smart card reader was a critical component in the 2015 general elections. It was used for the first time in Nigeria’s electoral process and it remains one of the greatest innovative technologies in the 2015 general elections.

Past elections in Nigeria had witness 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 had led to legal actions, electoral conflicts and violence.

In view of the negative impacts of electoral malpractices, global attention is now focusing on how to mitigate this undemocratic behavior and improve the electoral process. One of such strategies to combat electoral malpractices is the introduction of information and communication technology into the electoral process. Though, the use of technology in elections is not an end in itself, but assists in the various aspects of electoral administration (ACE Project). It is against this background that an electronic technology based device, the smart card reader was introduced into the Nigerian electoral process in 2015 to help improve and deepen electoral democracy.

The ability of the card reader to perform the above described functions as well as keeping a tally of the total numbers of voters accredited at the polling unit and forwarding the information to a central database server over a Global System for Mobile (GSM) network makes the card reader most welcome at this point in time in the nation’s electoral history (Engineering Network Team, 2015).

The proponent of the device according to Peters (2015) believed that the card reader procedure has the capacity to prevent or minimize rigging in the sense that there would not be multiple voting while the opponents believed that in the peculiar circumstances of the Nigerian situation, the card reader is designed to assist a certain political party to win the general election.

According to stakeholders, the card reader technology did not only reduce election rigging and snatching of ballot boxes from polling units, but also enhanced speedy and accurate electoral processes during accreditation of voters. Chief Executive Officer of Telecom Group, Dr. Emmanuel Ekuwem, told THISDAY that the use of card reader machines for the 2015 general elections has proved that INEC could conduct credible elections with minimal complaints (This Day Live, 2015).

The use of card readers for elections is highly commendable because it has helped reduced election fraud like multiple registrations and multiple voting. With the card readers, the true identities of card holders were matched with the details contained in their permanent voter’s cards (PVCs), during accreditation and the process helped in reducing fraudulent accreditation that marred electoral processes in the past,” (Ekuwem, 2015). He advised INEC to continue to explore the power of technology in subsequent elections, and called on the electoral body to create a backend database that is linked with the card readers in order to give voters the opportunity to vote from anywhere in the country, using their PVC, instead of restricting them to vote only in their registration centers. He advised INEC to apply the technology of Automated Teller Machines (ATM) cards issued by banks, which allows card holders to withdraw cash from any bank that is located anywhere in the country.

The smart card reader also improves the process of collating and announcing the result and makes the contender who has been announce as a looser to imbibe the culture of immediate congratulating of the announced winners.
Operational Challenges Of Card Reader

a. Inability of the Device To Function Effectively

In spite of the assurances given by INEC to address the issues that aroused with the card readers after its test-run in twelve states of the federation, the 2015 general elections witnessed the inability of the device to deliver effectively in a large number of polling units especially in the Presidential and National Assembly Elections. Therefore, these are the challenges the card reader was confronted with in its operation for the purpose of accreditation in the 2015 general elections?

b. Lack of Awareness and Sensitization of Electorates

The level of awareness among the electorates about the card reader was poor. A large number of Nigerians especially the electorates in rural communities are completely unaware of the device. Many of these categories of people have neither seen nor heard about the card reader until the Election Day. These categories of people have no information on the role of the card reader in the elections. There was a lot misconception about the device. To some of the electorates, the card reader was a voting device. This inadequate information dissemination and poor sensitization of the electorates on the card reader led to some poor human relations and uncooperative attitudes between some of the illiterate electorates and election officials.

c. Inadequate Training of Ad Hoc Staff

The training given to the ad hoc and INEC staff on the use of the card reader was inadequate. Majority of the Presiding Officers and Assistant President Officers I in the polling units were not effectively trained on the proper use and handling of the card reader. In most cases the venues provided by INEC for their training were crowded and not conducive such that most of the trainees did not properly receive the instructions on the use of the card reader. There were imperfect practical demonstrations of how the card reader would properly be effective. In some cases two card readers were provided for a class of hundred trainees.

Card reader breakdown was also witnessed during the elections. Some of devices malfunctioned on the day of election. Though, INEC had provided back-up in case of any card reader breakdown. However, some of the back-up failed to also function. For instance, five card readers were deployed for use at the polling unit of the Presidential Candidate for PDP in Bayelsa State yet none of them functioned. Similarly, the card reader at the polling unit of the Vice-Presidential Candidate of APC was non-functional.

A number of the smart card readers were not smart to function effectively. A few of the card readers were unable to function due to blank screen, non activation of the Subscriber Identification Module (SIM) card in the device and low battery. Some INEC officials according to Vanguard (2015) attributed the failure of the card readers to INEC engineers who could not decode the inbuilt security installation in the card reader. The security code in the card reader is reportedly designed to update the time and date of voting. One official claimed that the cards were initially programmed for February 14 that with the postponement to March 28, some of the cards readers had not been re-programmed (Vanguard, 2015).

d. Issue Of PVC Authentication And Biometric Data Verification

Wherein the card readers functioned, a few of the devices were confronted with the challenge of PVC authentication and biometric data verification of the voters in the polling units. The authentication and verification of voters was part of the accreditation process for the election. A number of the PVC issued to voters by INEC could not be authenticated thereby disenfranchising some eligible voters in the elections. Wherein some voters’ cards were authenticated, their biometric data could not be verified after several trials; and where it is verified, it is slow in some cases especially the fingerprints.

The card reader, for instance, was unable to recognize the fingertips of President Goodluck Jonathan and his wife Patience, when they went to vote in Otuoke, in Bayelsa State. Such was the experience of using the card readers. But the challenge was visibly noticed during the Presidential and National Assembly elections on March 28. During the Governorship and State House of Assembly Elections, the complaints reduced drastically across the country, as INEC was able to tackle the lapses within the two weeks break before the April 11 Governorship and State House of Assembly elections (This Day Live April, 23 2015).

For instance, in Borno State, ten percent of eligible voters cards were authenticated and biometric data verified by the card readers at most of the polling units (Odiakose, 2015). However, the inability of the device to capture the fingerprints of some voters was attributed to greasy or dirty fingers of the voters. In most cases, people had to scrub their hands on the ground just to ensure that the device recognizes their fingerprints (Okoro, 2015).

e. Wrong Perception on Card Reading Machine
Some electorates believed that the card reader is designed to assist a certain political party to win the general election. Peters (2015) maintained that the major plank of their argument is that the card reader must have been programmed to assist a pre-determined winner of the election by ensuring that so many persons would disarmically be disenfranchised to deny other parties of favorable votes thereby ensuring the winning of an INEC preferred or pre-determined party. There is also the sentiment about the use of a faith based bank to transfer money for printing of permanent voters’ card and the configuration of the card reader.

The use of the card reader for the 2015 general elections was also criticized on the premise that its timing was too close for over a sixty eight million Nigerian voters. Considering the fact that the device was relatively a new technology that has not been tested or tried in Nigeria, it was therefore argued that INEC should step aside the card reader in the 2015 general elections. This argument appears to me to be valid to the extent that INEC will conduct an election with such magnitude and deploy a device that will have a far-reaching impact on the electoral process, would not have used the device in previous smaller bye-elections to effectuate its effectiveness and efficiency.

Research Methodology
The study adopted Documentary Method. The data/information for this study were generated from secondary sources such as books and other literatures like articles in reputable journals, periodicals and newspapers, magazines, and other internet sources were consulted. In the same light, the official documents from Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as well as reports from other relevant bodies were carefully examined and necessary information was extracted for the purpose of the study.

The population of this study is 170 million which the total number of Nigerians population. Stratified random sampling technique was adopted where the 36 states of the federation were grouped in to six (6) strata to reflect the six (6) geo-political zone of the country (North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-East, South-West and South South). Simply random sampling technique were also adopted where three (3) states (Gombe, Kaduna and Lagos) was randomly selected to serve as a sample for the study.

Summary, Conclusion And Recommendation
No doubt, the smart card reader had played a very significant role in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. However, there is 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 would need to be in place by INEC for the deployment of the card reader in future elections so as to strengthen the democratic process. INEC should ensure that its conduct and activities in future elections is transparent especially with the use of technology like the card reader. This is because transparency is a key principle in credible elections; and this will bring about trust and public confidence in the electoral process. Also, INEC should consult widely and carryout effective campaigns on the card reader and any other technology to be deployed in future elections. Stakeholders including the media, political parties, civil societies, national assembly and the electorate should be adequately consulted. INEC should partner with them to carryout massive dissemination of information; sensitize them on the need to key into the technology in order to improve the electoral process and deepen the democratic process (Ekuwem, 2015).

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 (ACE Project). 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. The Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended) should be amended to include the use of the card reader for biometric verification of voters for the purpose of accreditation in future elections. Therefore, the National Assembly should quickly be approached by INEC to amend the electoral legal frameworks on the use of card reader in order to address the issue of legality which the card reader had generated.
References