
Perceived Impact of Technological Devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria elections

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ABSTRACT: *The research work focused on perceived impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria elections. A survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study is made up of politicians and citizens of Nigeria from the six geo-political zones. Simple random sampling technique was used to determine the sample for the study. Fifty respondents were sampled from each geo-political zone making a total of three hundred (300) respondents. This sampling technique gives each member of the population equal chance of being selected. The instrument for data collection is the questionnaire which has eighteen (18) items designed to elicit information on perceived impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria elections. The instrument was validated by two experts in political science at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State. The mean was used to analyse the data collected. The findings of the study showed that deployment and use of technological devices in Nigeria elections reduced election rigging, shows accurate records of accredited voters, minimizes the volume of election litigation, distinguishes actual voters from fake voters, and ensures a considerable degree of free and fair elections. The findings also showed that the measures to put in place for conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria are deployment and use of technological devices, electoral reforms, improvement of electoral infrastructures, strengthening electoral security, voters' education among others. Conclusion and relevant recommendations were made.*

KEYWORDS: impact, technological, devices, electoral, malpractices, elections.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has a complex history of electoral challenges as previous elections have been marred by allegations of irregularities and voter suppression. Since independence in 1960, violence and myriad malpractices have persistently plagued the process of electing the country's leaders. These issues

erode political trust in the electoral process, undermine democratic principles and hinder the country's progress towards a fair and inclusive society. According to Agbu (2016), Nigeria electoral process is characterized by all forms of electoral malpractices including multiple voting, impersonation, manipulation and falsification of results which had led to legal actions, electoral conflicts and violence. Omoruyi (2001), observed that inadequate transparent mechanism is the problem of the existing voting system in Nigeria in which electoral officers enjoy overdo privilege to manually collate, count, announce election results. According to him, the method is prone to danger of human error and deliberate manipulations. The susceptibility nature of the method allows electoral officials with corrupt motives and their accomplices to easily rig election at every stage of the process unnoticed. Furthermore, the system allows for multiple voting by non-eligible persons, and intimidation of voters by scaring them away from casting their votes or forcing them to vote candidate against their wishes.

However, Ayeni and Esan (2018), while arguing for the imperative of electoral reform observed that, electoral processes in Nigeria among others are characterized by political violence particularly, political assassination, unbridled desperation by politicians to ensure 'sweeping winners' take all victories, thus leading to the manipulation of the electoral process, brazen falsification of election results, intimidation of voters, electoral officials and observers, underage voting, hoarding of ballot boxes and ballot papers, announcing of election results where there was no voting, diversion of ballot boxes, ballot papers and result sheets, multiple voting across different polling units.

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), (2023), reported that, despite expectations for greater electoral integrity, instances of voter suppression persisted during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Voter suppression refers to deliberate measure and tactics deployed to hinder eligible voters from participating in the electoral process. This can take various forms including voter intimidation, deliberately placing hurdles in the path of voter registration, inadequate access to polling stations and the manipulation of electoral boundaries. Of great concern during the elections were short comings such as the uneven distribution of polling stations, sporadic incident of the late arrival of voting materials or ad-hoc staff which resulted in late opening of polls, particularly in regions with high population density or traditionally supportive of certain political parties. In some instances, citizens who travelled long distances to cast their votes were deterred from participating in the electoral process resulting to low voter turnout.

However, Edi (2023), asserted that, there were widespread reports of voters' intimidation and violence in different geo-political zones of Nigeria, such as South-East; Enugu and Abia State, South-South: Edo, Delta and Rivers state. South-West: Ogun and Lagos state. North East: Borno state. North-West: Kano, Kaduna, Sokoto and Kebbi state. North Central: Kogi, and Nasarawa state. One of the interesting development about the 2023 electoral violence was the incident in Lagos state where the Oro cult was deployed in some communities to intimidate and scare away voters and prevent them from going out to cast their votes. Edi (2023), further observed that the occurrence of vote buying, an illegal practice where political contestants buy votes using money or gifts severely undermined the credibility of 2023 general elections. The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG)(2023) noted that instances of violence, ballot box snatching and the disruption of voting activities by political thugs were reported across the country, causing fear and insecurity among

voters. Such incident not only disenfranchise citizens but also casts doubts on the overall legitimacy of election result.

It is observed that in Nigeria, elections have been one of the main problems of the democratic process (Omotola, 2011). The conduct of free and fair elections have always been a problem which continues to threaten the very survival of the country and questions the relevance of democracy (Agbu, 2016). Indeed, the problems associated with elections have direct impact on the performance of democratic institutions. The Nigerian government acknowledges that controversies over highly rigged elections have been the forerunner to political violence and instability in Nigeria (FGN, 2014).

Many factors have been attributed to promoting electoral malpractices in Nigeria. These factors include ethnicity, material poverty, crisis of confidence in the country's electoral process, challenges of communication, logistics and insecurity of lives and property. Okafor (2013), observed that political parties in Nigeria are largely formed along-ethnic lines, irrespective of the provision that political association seeking to be registered as political parties should have membership transcending different ethnic groups, however, political parties are still ethnic based. The ethnic politics that characterized party formation gave rise to electoral malpractices and ethnic conflicts. The major political parties in Nigeria were formed along ethnic lines. The All Peoples Congress (APC) is dominated by Northern Nigerians, while Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) is dominated by Southern Nigerians. The development has never created favourable political atmosphere in Nigeria.

In addition, Esan and Ayeni (2017) reported that lack of independence of the electoral commission at both the federal and state level is a key deficiency of our electoral commission at both the federal and state level. This is mainly as a result of the propensity of the ruling government to control the Electoral Management Body (EMB) to serve narrow and partisan interests. Nigeria's democratic dispensation is awash with records and reports of complicity of INEC in promoting electoral manipulation (Adejumobi, 2007). Jega (2015), observed that INEC contributed its own fair share of electoral problems. According to him, INEC do not make adequate arrangement for the transportation of sensitive election materials to the polling and collation centres. Result sheets disappeared and appeared in different centres, while corrupt party agents simply sold misused ballot papers to the highest bidder. Despite the infraction of INEC, it is observed that the operators of the system have carried on without punishing officials of the election management body. This is substantiated by Jega (2015), when he argues that, there have been instances when the election tribunals set up to adjudicate on the conduct of some elections had established that INEC was partisan, but the full weight of the law was never brought on those INEC officials. Lack of punishment of course results to impunity.

Moreover, abject poverty of majority of Nigerians makes the elections and electoral process subject to manipulation and corrupt practices. The National Bureau of statistics reports that 72 percent of Nigerians are living on less than one dollar a day. Federal Government of Nigeria (2014), admits that unemployment rate in Nigeria increased from 19.7 percent in 2009 to 21.1 percent in 2010 and 2011 respectively. According to the National Planning Commission (2014), the unemployed population is at present dominated by the youths who are mostly school leavers with senior secondary school qualifications and graduates of tertiary institutions. Poverty makes the electorate

susceptible, and subverts and disembowels democracy and corrupts the electoral process through excessive monetization of politics. The incidence of vote buying was more prevalent among the poor. Even electoral officers are influenced with money or other gratification.

Also, the challenge of communication and logistics leading to delays in transportation of election officials and materials to the voting centres have done great harm in conducting credible elections in Nigeria. This problem is more pronounced in coastal areas where the means of transportation is relatively more troublesome. We have had disturbing cases of late arrival of electoral officials and materials to election centres, with voters waiting almost interminably, resulting to wariness and frustration among voters.

The question now is what should be done to make Nigeria's electoral process and by extension the democratic process more credible and acceptable? However, Agbu 2016 and Nwafor (2016), have called for the adoption and use of technological devices in conducting elections to ensure transparency and credibility. According to them, the deployment and use of technological devices in the electoral process, particularly, electronic voters' registration, the use of bio-metric data capturing machines, and to the issuance of permanent voters card (PVC). The introduction of card reading machines among other electronic devices are believed to be sure way to achieving transparency in the electoral process and elections in Nigeria. Card reading machine is a device which is specially designed for the electronic authentication of voters on the polling day. A card reader is a device that read the content of the encrypted voters bio-data and biometrics details with the associated private key, matching the voter's information on the data base with the version of each voter bio-data and biometrics it house.

Ezigbo (2017) and Nwafor (2016), have outlined the advantages of technological devices in managing free and fair elections to include; reduction of election rigging and snatching of ballot boxes from polling units, accurate accreditation of voters, reduction in electoral fraud such as multiple registration and multiple voting, provide accurate records of accredited voters, distinguish actual voters from fake voters which helped in ensuring security of persons and property at the polling station. According to them, it ensures a considerable degree of free and fair election, and minimizes the volume of election litigation. It also ensures a considerable degree of credibility, transparency, acceptability of voting and successful election outcome. However, it reduces electoral conflict and violence to the barest minimum. Apart from the undue delay in the electoral process, particularly the card reader machines deployed for the election, which sometimes malfunctioned in several polling units, the deployment and use of technology remains the best ways of promoting free and fair election in Nigeria. Omotola (2011), and Ezigbo (2017), have seriously advocated for electoral reforms as a tool for managing free and fair election in Nigeria. The scholars contended that a neutral and independent electoral management body is one of the fundamental pre-requisite for a truly free and fair election and the establishment of true democracy in any nation. The idea of an independent Election Management Body (EMB) is to among others create a financial autonomous INEC. Omotola (2011), assets that the role of the INEC is greatly impaired and compromised by the fact that it is constituted by the president, coupled with the absence of an independent source of funding and its reliance largely on the presidency for its finances.

Other measures to check electoral malpractices in Nigeria are improvement of electoral infrastructures, strengthening electoral security and voters' education. Mezieobi and Mezieobi (2012), call for extensive voters' education in Nigeria. According to them, voters' education is primarily meant to expose the electorate on the essence of voting credible candidates, who based on their qualifications and contributions to national development are genuinely out to serve, to protect the welfare, aspirations and interest of the voters. Voters' education is the process of extending political education enlightenment and mobilization of the masses to participate in politics through responsible voting, which results in electing credible leadership and political office holders.

Statement of the Problem

The electoral process in Nigeria is characterized by massive fraud, intimidation, assassination of political opponents, vote buying, vote rigging and outright violence. The past elections in Nigeria have witnessed the desperate bid for political power by some stakeholders who engage in all forms of electoral malpractices because the electoral processes are manually done and subjected to all kinds of manipulation which result to multiple voting, impersonation, falsification of results which had led to legal actions, electoral conflicts and violence. Lack of independence of the electoral commission at both federal and state levels has contributed immensely in promoting electoral malpractices and its attendant problems. It is based on these glaring problems that a clear understanding is sought to find out the impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria's elections.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to find out the following:

1. The perceived impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria's elections.
2. The challenges of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria.
3. The measures to put in place for conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What are the perceived impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria's elections?
2. What are the challenges of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria?
3. What are the measures to put in place for conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria?

METHODOLOGY

A survey research design was adopted for the study. The population is made up of politicians, citizens of Nigeria from the six geo-political zones. Simple random sampling technique was used to determine the sample of the study. Fifty respondents were sampled from each geo-political zone making a total of three hundred (300) respondents. This sampling technique gives each member of the population equal opportunity of being selected as a subject. It is an unbiased sampling technique.

The instrument for data collection is the questionnaire which has 18 items designed to elicit information on perceived impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria elections. The instrument was first validated by an expert in political science at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State. The reliability of the research instrument was determined through measure of internal consistency of the items. The Cronbac Alpha was used to establish the internal consistency of 0.80 and it was considered reliable. For data analysis, the research questions were analyzed using mean. Mean of 2.5 and above is said to be high and effective and those below 2.5 are said to be low and ineffective.

RESULTS

The following are the results of the data analysis:

Research Question 1: What are the perceived impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria's elections?

Table 1: Mean rating scores on the perceived impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria's elections.

S/NO	ITEMS	\bar{x}	DECISION
1.	Reduction of election rigging	3.3	Accepted
2	Accurate accreditation of voters	3.1	Accepted
3	Records of accredited voters	2.8	Accepted
4	Minimizes the volume of election litigation	3.5	Accepted
5	Distinguishes actual voters from fake voters	3.4	Accepted
6	It ensures a considerable degree of free and fair elections	3.5	Accepted
7	It promotes a considerable degree of credibility, transparency and acceptability	2.8	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The result presented in table one shows that items 1-7 were rated high by the respondents. This was clearly indicated from their respective mean scores of 3.3, 3.1, 2.8, 3.5, 3.4, 3.5 and 2.8 which are above the criterion of acceptance fixed at 2.5 and above. It means that the perceived impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria's elections are reduction in election rigging, accurate accreditation of voters, records of accredited voters, minimizes the volume of election litigation, distinguishes actual voters from fake voters, it ensures a considerable degree of free and fair elections, it promotes a considerable degree of credibility, transparency and acceptability.

Research Question 2: What are the challenges of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean rating scores on the challenges of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria.

S/NO	ITEMS	\bar{x}	DECISION
8	Bribery and corruption	3.5	Accepted
9	Ethnicity and tribalism	3.3	Accepted
10	Lack of independence of the electoral commission	3.1	Accepted
11	Inadequate security of lives and property	3.5	Accepted
12	Problem of logistics	3.3	Accepted
13	Inadequate independence of the judiciary	3.4	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The result presented in table two shows that items 8-13 were rated high by the respondents. This was clearly indicated from their respective mean scores of 3.5, 3.3, 3.1, 3.5, 3.3 and 3.4 which are above the criterion of acceptance fixed at 2.5 and above. It means that the challenges of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria are bribery and corruption, ethnicity and tribalism, lack of independence of the electoral commission, inadequate security of lives and property, problem of logistics and inadequate independence of the judiciary.

Research Question 3: What are the measures to put in place for conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria?

Table 3: Mean rating scores on the measures to put in place for conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria.

S/NO	ITEMS	\bar{x}	DECISION
14	Deployment and use of technological devices in the electoral process	3.4	Accepted
15	Electoral reforms	3.5	Accepted
16	Improvement of electoral infrastructures	3.3	Accepted
17	Strengthening electoral security	3.5	Accepted
18	Voters' education	3.1	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The result presented in table three shows that items 14-18 were rated high by the respondents. This was clearly indicated from their respective mean scores of 3.4, 3.5, 3.3, 3.5 and 3.1 which are above the criterion of acceptance fixed at 2.5 and above. It means that the measures to put in place for conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria are deployment and use of technological devices in the electoral process, electoral reforms, improvement of electoral infrastructures, strengthening electoral security and voters' education.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The result of the analysis of research question one shows that the perceived impact of technological devices in checking electoral malpractices in Nigeria elections are reduction of election rigging, accurate accreditation of voters, records of accredited voters, minimizes the volume of election litigation, distinguishes actual voters from fake voters among others. These findings are in agreement with Ezigbo (2017), and Nwafor (2016), who reported that technological devices promote free and fair elections, reduce election rigging and snatching of ballot boxes from polling units.

The result of the analysis of research question two shows that the challenges of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria are bribery and corruption, ethnicity and tribalism, lack of independence of the electoral commission, inadequate security of lives and property, problems of logistics among others. These findings are in line with Okafor (2013), who observed that political parties in Nigeria are largely formed along ethnic lines, irrespective of the provision that political association seeking to be registered as political parties should have membership transcending different ethnic groups.

The result of the analysis of research question three shows that the measures to put in place for conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria are deployment and use of technological devices in the electoral process, electoral reforms, improvement of electoral infrastructures, strengthening electoral security and voters' education. These findings are in agreement with Mezieobi and Mezieobi (2012), who advocated for extensive voters' education as means to expose the electorates on the essence of voting credible candidates that will cater for their welfare, aspirations and interest.

CONCLUSION

Deployment and use of technological devices such as biometric data capturing machines, permanent voters' card, electronic transmission of votes, card reading machines will help to reduce electoral malpractices, and make elections transparent, credible and acceptable. In addition, electoral reforms, improvement of electoral infrastructures, strengthening electoral security and voters' education are some of the measures that can also be put in place to check electoral malpractices in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. Provision of adequate electoral infrastructures such as polling stations in remote and densely populated areas.
2. There is need for electoral reforms, continual review and improvement of electoral laws and regulations that will ensure that political leadership is strongly committed to promoting the rights of Nigerian citizens.
3. Deployment and use of technological devices in voters' registration, result collation, and transmission process which can increase efficiency, transparency and accuracy.

4. Nigerian government need to strengthen electoral security. This will help to diffuse tension, and mitigate the risks of violence. It involves deployment of adequate security personnel to polling stations.
5. There is need for adequate independence of the judiciary and the election management body.
6. Voters education should be provided through the mass media, churches, communities and ministry of information.

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