

BIMODAL VOTER ACCREDITATION SYSTEM (BVAS) AND THE OUTCOME OF THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

A major challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria has been the failure to design and operate a credible electoral process. This has necessitated series of reforms in the electoral process by the electoral management body over the years with intent to stem electoral fraud and enhance public confidence in the electoral process. In the 2023 general elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced a gizmo, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System, (BVAS) to verify Permanent Voters Card using both finger print and facial recognition of voters in the voting process. This study assesses the impact of BVAS on the outcome of the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria. The study which is analytical relied on secondary method of data collection. Merton's functionalist theory was adopted for the study. The outcome of content analysis adopted to analyze the data reveal that BVAS enhanced the credibility of the 2023 general elections as the outcome of the election reflected the wishes and aspirations of Nigerians. Amongst other suggestions, the paper recommends that technological solutions such as BVAS need to be complemented by conducive human environmental factors to work optimally.

Keywords: *BVAS, 2023 General Elections, Democratic Consolidation.*

DOI: 10.31039/bjir.v2i7.56

1. INTRODUCTION

The health of a democracy is anchored on the conduct of elections and every other thing is secondary. Free, fair and credible elections help to minimize post-election conflicts and grants legitimacy to the electoral process; while flawed elections serve as a catalyst for violence and conflict that tends to undermine democratic consolidation especially in developing countries (Ugbudu, 2019, Korth, 2010). In modern times with the elevation of liberal democracy as mankind's ideological evolution; albeit, final form of human government which constitutes the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992). Popular will has become the source of sovereignty rather than

the whims and caprices of a few which has made elections the most popularly accepted way of leadership recruitment in modern times. Thus the prospect for sustainable democratic rule is therefore a function of fair organization of elections. They are not only crucial for eliciting consent from the citizens as regards who should govern them but they are central to the enthronement of democratic government and democratic sustainability.

Though widely recognized as a mitochondrion that nurtures a stable democratic order in any democratic clime (UN, 1992), in Nigeria, the reverse is the case as elections rather tend to undermine democracy. In fact, as rightly observed by Edoh (2002), since independence in 1960, there is hardly any election that has not been tainted by malpractices largely because of the pecks of office as public office is a guarantee to illicit wealth accumulation due to poor financial accountability system in the country. Hence, politicians obsessed with winning at all cost regard elections as warfare and use every conceivable means to subvert standard electoral practices. The outcome is that the electoral process lacks transparency, fairness and credibility. And once an electoral process lacks these three ingredients, it remains a charade in its totality (Iniobong, 2021).

The first General Election in Nigeria was in 1954 at the heels of the Lytleton Constitution that provided for separate elections into the regional and central Legislatures in the country. This was followed by the 1959 federal elections which was the second General Election in the country before independence in 1960. It should be noted that, these two pre-independence elections were supervised by British officials and were hailed as free and fair despite pockets of violence, stuffing of ballot boxes, obstruction and intimidation of opponents reported in the press. But as observed by Edoh (2003);

If indeed the 1959 elections were broadly, free of corruption and other electoral irregularities, they were destined to remain the last elections to enjoy such positive assessment for the next twenty or so years. The years following independence in 1960 were those of direct, open and quite often, official manipulation of the electoral system by the political parties in power in each of the regions (p.17).

The above assertion by Edoh still haunts the country till today as many political analysts and public commentators are of the opinion that till date, Nigeria has never recorded any successful election exercise. The first post-independence election in Nigeria was the 1964 General election. These elections were preceded by the 1962 Census crisis that led to series of political realignments before the elections. The 1964 General Elections from onset had a legitimacy deficit as nomination of candidates was marked by irregularities. Many candidates were denied

access to nomination forms by electoral officers that had allegiance to rival candidates. Above all election campaigns were marred by violence and free use of thugs to intimidate and eliminate opponents. The Daily Times Newspaper of December, 31, 1964 (as cited in Agbakoba & Inam 2002: p.8) scathingly in its post-election report wrote that

Polling in Nigeria (sic) first election since independence ended last night after a mixed response throughout the country ranging from brisk polling in the North to a total boycott in the East. In the Federal territory of Lagos, there were virtually no polling booths, having been damaged by fanatics. People were shot and wounded in clashes between police and demonstrators. Few voted in the Midwest and some violence occurred in the West.

The dispute among the political parties and party leaders over the conduct and result of the 1964 General Election and the subsequent crisis that arose over the Western Regional election in 1965 and the attendant break down of law and order in the region among other things culminated to the military take-over and bloody civil war 1966-1970.

Nigeria again returned to civil rule in 1979. Dispute over the credibility of election result also metamorphosed in the Second Republic 1979-1983. The victory of Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) for a second term in office by the Federal Election Commission (FEDECO) was challenged by most of the political parties. In fact, serious questions were raised on the geometric increase in the voters' register occurring in NPN controlled states by the opposition parties. Again members of the political class failed to respect the rules and regulations guiding the conduct of the election and so many irregularities took place. Agbakoba and Inam (2002) have chronicled these to include, supply of ballot boxes and papers in excess of requirement, voting after the prescribed closing time, voting at polling stations without a voters list and failure to announce results on the spot after collation. The disagreement over the election result snowballed to mass protests and civil unrest that forced the military to wade in through a military coup in December 31, 1983.

Disagreement over election result still reared its ugly head in the aborted Third Republic that was midwived by Ibrahim Babangida from 1985-1993. The result of the presidential election that was won by M.K.O. Abiola was annulled by the military on June 12, 1993. However, analysts argued that the elections were on balance, peaceful and coercion free and largely untainted with bribery (Jinadu & Edoh, 1990). Though pockets of incidents of impersonation, multiple voting, alteration of collated figures were reported in the country. It has been pointed out that the success of the election was due to the introduction of the option A4 system. The

option A4 system is a departure from the conventional voting system and an innovation which had not been used in the country before. It involved queuing behind the photographs of the candidates of the political parties of their choice after which the counting is done by the presiding officer in charge of the polling booth in the presence of everybody and the result announced immediately on the spot in each of the polling booth (Nnadozie,2007).

With the return to democratic rule in 1999, the story has not been different. In as much as the 1999 General elections that ushered in the Fourth Republic were less rancorous because they were supervised by the military, they were indeed not free and fair. Oddih (2007) noted that under-aged were mobilized to vote and party agents awarded themselves pre-stamped ballot papers and were assisted by electoral officers to vote in addition to over voting. It is against this irregularities that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in collaboration with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), prior to the 2023 General Elections organized a retreat in Enugu to develop multi-strategic plans to improve the credibility of the electoral system. This culminated in the adoption of electronic voters' register to address the problem of multiple registration associated with past voters' register (Okwechime,2007). This marked the introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the electoral process in the country.

In spite of the introduction of ICT in the 2003 General Elections in Nigeria, it was observed by the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) that minimum standards for democratic election were not met and many instances of ballot box stuffing and serious irregularities were observed in many states of the federation (Okwechime,2007).

The 2007 General Elections that followed were also marked by serious inadequacies that dented the credibility of the election. As observed by Elekwa (2007), there were many instances of snatching and theft of ballot boxes and papers, underage voting and an unacceptably high incidence of violence recorded during the exercise. Several litigations were instituted in election tribunals against the outcome of the 2007 General Elections. Hence, Animashaun (2010, p.107) has pointed out that the election will go down in history as one that attracted the 'highest number of post-election litigations in Nigeria'.

When President Umaru Yar' Adua who took over from Obasanjo in 2007, he acknowledged that there were flaws in the election that ushered him into office and re-iterated his commitment to electoral reforms in the country. Consequently, he inaugurated a 22- member panel to review

the electoral process and make recommendations for electoral reforms. The Committee sat and made recommendations which formed the basis of the Electoral Act 2010. The 2011 General elections that were held on the behest of the Electoral Act, 2010 were by all standards a substantial improvement from the 2007 elections but as usual the process was dotted with some skirmishes. There were cases of ballot box snatching in Delta and Zamfara states, while cases of under-aged voting were reported in Bauchi and Kano states (Iganga,2012). However, it has been widely acknowledged that the 2011 General Elections marked ‘a tremendous departure from the past with respect to the administration and management of the elections and post-election period (Ngara,2014, p. 97).

The foregoing analysis shows that since the return to democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999, the electoral process has been bedeviled by electoral malpractices and this has eroded public confidence in the electoral system.

Moved by the desire to restore public confidence in the electoral process, INEC introduced the Smart Card Reader in the 2015 General Elections. It is a technological device meant to checkmate multiple voting, impersonation, falsification of result and to ensure transparency and accountability in the electoral process. The introduction of the card reader had a remarkable impact on the outcome of the elections. In the first place, it ensured that voters were authenticated and only accredited voters were allowed to vote. It also acted as a check against falsification of election result as figures that were not in tandem with what was recorded and stored in the card reader were queried. More to it, the activities of party thugs usually engaged by politicians to snatch ballot boxes were rendered useless as results in those areas were canceled. It also enhanced transparency in the electoral process as for the first time in the country’s history an opposition party, The All Progressive Congress (APC) was able to defeat the ruling party in Power, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) by winning the presidency and the incumbent conceded defeat and did not challenge the victory in court.

Swayed by the success recorded with the introduction of the Smart Card Reader in the 2015 General Elections, INEC in the 2023 General Elections introduced Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). This study assesses the impact of this technological gizmo on the outcome of the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria with intent to argue a case for more reforms to strengthen the electoral process and promote democratic consolidation. The study is divided into four section. Section one is the introduction. Section two deals with conceptual issues. While section three discusses BVAS and the outcome of the 2023 general elections.

Section four is the concluding part which summarizes the content of the study and made recommendations.

2. CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

Elections

This refers to a process where an organized people choose an individual or individuals to hold public office. It is the selection of persons for office by ballot and making choice as between alternatives (Eya,2003). In the political arena, elections are held periodically to elect individuals to represent the entire country in both the legislative arm of government and the executive arm of government. In Nigeria, elections are held every four years to elect the President, Vice- President and members of the National Assembly and the federal level. While Governors and their deputies and members of the State Houses of Assembly are elected at the state level.

Since the emergence of liberal democracy expressed through popular will as the most preferred system of government as opposed to monarchy, aristocracy, dictatorship and theocracy, elections remain central to the success of democracy. Elections avail the electorate the opportunity to make choice, the audacity to hold elected leaders accountable and it serves as an antidote against perpetuation in power. Free, fair and credible elections are a prerequisite for peace, stability and progress in a body polity which enhances democratic consolidation. For elections to be free and fair, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) at its 154th Session held in Paris on 26th March,1994 underscored some basic principles to guide Governments and Parliaments throughout the world, to wit; establish clear criteria for the registration of voters, such as age, citizenship and residence, and ensure that such provisions are applied without distinction of any kind; provide for the formation and free functioning of political parties, possibly regulate the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns, ensure the separation of party and State, and establish the conditions for competition in legislative elections on an equitable basis; States should take all necessary and appropriate measures to ensure that the principle of the secret ballot is respected, and that voters are able to cast their ballots freely, without fear or intimidation; State authorities should ensure that the ballot is conducted to avoid fraud or other illegality, that the security and integrity of the process is maintained, and that ballot counting is undertaken by trained personnel, subject to monitoring and/ or impartial verification; States should take the necessary steps to ensure that parties, candidates and

supporters enjoy equal security, and that State authorities take the necessary steps to prevent electoral violence

In Nigeria, it has been observed by Oddih (2007) that the country's electoral processes have always accommodated, provided and projected these basic principles, tenets and features of democracy and elections, yet the incidence of electoral frauds and malpractices have continued to emerge through the electioneering years.

BVAS

The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) is an electronic device designed to verify the Permanent Voters Card (PVC) and enable human recognition through a biometric verification mechanism using both finger print and facial recognition of voters. This technological innovation introduced by INEC in the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria was meant to serve as identification solution for voter registration, voting and tallying identification. Its common modalities include finger print recognition, palm vein recognition, iris recognition and finger recognition (Ogunbamowo, 2021). With the introduction of BVAS, there was no manual accreditation and use of incident forms. All accreditation was electronic and bimodal based on facial and finger print recognition. With the introduction of BVAS, the electoral law emphasized that all results must be uploaded to INEC official website at the polling units before taking it to the ward, constituency, Local Government Area or State collation centres. Also if the number of votes cast is more than the number of accredited votes, the polling unit result is cancelled. This was meant to prevent massive thumb printing and stuffing of ballot boxes.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutions, policies, laws and technologies are invented to serve specific functions in the society. In an attempt to study and analyze the beneficial impact of a phenomenon to the society, the functionalist theory becomes relevant. This study is therefore anchored on Merton's (1957) theory of functionalism. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of how its constituent elements; namely norms, customs, traditions and institutions work towards the proper functioning of the body as a whole, Urry (as cited in Igiebor, 2016, p.80). The theory sees the society/ community as a system of interconnected parts that work in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. Functionalist theorists such as Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) were concerned with the question of how

certain societies maintain internal stability and survive overtime. He maintained that such societies tend to be segmented with equivalent parts held together by shared values, common symbols and identity

The central concern of functionalism is to explain the apparent stability and internal cohesion needed by societies to endure over time (Igiebor,2016). Societies are seen as coherent, bounded and fundamentally relational constructs that function like organisms, with their various social institutions working together in an unconscious, quasi-automatic fashion toward achieving an overall social equilibrium. All social and cultural phenomena are therefore seen as functional in the sense of working collectively in an overall social balance. They are primarily analyzed in terms of this function. Therefore, the social structure is the network of statuses connected by associated roles.

In every society, there is the economic system, the political system and the legal system that co-exist and work in harmony to maintain social stability. Technology is also an important instrument that shapes the society, hence human societies and technology have become inextricably linked. In every society, technology is used to enhance the socioeconomic and political development of the Society. In Nigeria since independence, elections are a sham characterized by widespread rigging. Despite the efforts of the electoral management body, INEC to keep the electoral process as transparent as possible, there has been widespread reports of electoral malpractices aided with violence that often pose a threat to democratic sustainability in the country. This has necessitated the introduction of a technological device, BVAS by INEC to serve as an identification solution to voter identification and accreditation in the electoral process. Studying the impact of this phenomenon on the 2023 elections in Nigeria justifies the adoption of the functionalist theory in this discourse.

4. THE IMPACT OF BVAS ON THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

Elections in Nigeria are more of feint characterized by rigging aided sometimes with violence. Thus over the years, both local and foreign observers have often criticized elections in Nigeria of being bereft of credibility. In the 2019 General Elections in the country for instance, the EU (EOM) reiterated the need for serious electoral reforms due to the systemic failings and low level of voter participation recorded during the elections in their final report (Igbo, Daka & Omolaoye, 2019). Peeved by large scale public condemnation and as part of efforts to enhance transparency and restore public confidence in the electoral process, the electoral management

body, INEC resorted to technological innovation to improve the electoral process. In the 2015 General Election in the country, INEC introduced the Smart Card Reader (SCR) to verify the Permanent Voters Card (PVC) as well as send data of all accredited voters to INEC Central Server, equipping the Commission to audit figures submitted by Polling Officials at the Polling Unit to determine whether alterations were made.

Encouraged by the successes recorded with the introduction of the SCR in the 2015 General elections such as making sure that only accredited voters were able to vote as well as minimization of falsification of results and the reduction of post-election violence. In the 2023 General Election, INEC introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). It is a technological device that integrates three-stage voting processes. In the first place, it serves as voter enrolment device during voter registration. Secondly, it serves to accredit voters on the election day. Also, it serves to upload results to INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal on election day (Ogunbamowo, 2021).

The introduction of BVAS helped to correct imperfections that have plagued previous elections in the country. Notably, BVAS helped to bring out the real number of voters that voted in the general election. Prior to the election, INEC declared that 93.4 million voters were registered for the election out of which 87.2 million PVC's were collected for the election. The result of the 2023 Presidential election shows that only 24.9 million persons voted, representing just 26.92% of the registered voters (Amata,2023). This attests that BVAS eliminated massive thumb printing and stuffing of ballot papers which was associated with previous elections in Nigeria that did not make the votes to count and inflamed violence in the electoral process.

Table I below shows that votes cast in Presidential elections have been dropping since the introduction of technology in elections since 2015

Year	Valid Votes	Turn Out
1999	29.8 million	52.3 %
2003	39 million	69.1%
2007	35.4 million	57.5%
2011	38.2 million	53.68%
2015	28.6 million	43.65 %
2019	27.3 million	34.75%
2023	24 million	26.71%

Source: INEC data @thecable.ng

The introduction of BVAS also eliminated incumbency advantage previously enjoyed by elected political office holders. The outcome of the 2023 election shows that many political heavy weights had fallen. Many serving and ex-governors lost their states as well as their bid to go back to the Senate which is widely regarded as a retirement home for former governors. Among governors, ex-governors and Senators who lost their bid to go to the Senate chronicled by Seye (2023) are Kabiru Gaya former governor of Kano State who contested on the platform of the PDP lost to Kawu Sumaila of the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP). Abubakar Bagudu of Kebbi state (PDP) scored 92,389 votes against Adamu Aliero (APC) who scored 126,588 votes. Bala Ibn Na' Allah, Kebbi APC polled 70,785 against PDP's Garba Maidoki who got 75,232 votes. Gabriel Suswam former governor of Benue state polled 103,303 against APC's Emmanuel Udende that got 141,405 votes. Samuel Ortom, the serving governor of Benue State PDP polled 106,882 votes against Titus Zam, APC who got 143,152 votes to go to the Senate. In Plateau state serving governor Simon Lalong APC got 91,674 and lost to Napoleon Bali, PDP who got 148,884 votes. Taraba State Governor, Dairus Ishaku of the PDP got 45,704 against his opponent David Jimkuta, APC who polled 85,415 votes. In Nasarawa state former governor and serving Senator, Tanko Al Makura of the APC got 76,813 votes against Mohammed Onawo of the PDP who won with 93,064 votes. Former governors, Ben Ayade of Cross- River state, Sam Egwu of Ebonyi state and Okezie Ikpeazu of Abia state and Ifeanyi Ugwanyi of Enugu state lost their bid to go to the Senate (Seye, 2023). This is a clear testimony that BVAS was a game-changer as incumbency factor was no longer an advantage. Also, the winning margin since the introduction of technology in elections since 2015 underscores this fact. This is illustrated in the table below.

Table:2 Winning margin in Presidential elections in Nigeria

Winner	Votes	Margin
1999- Obasanjo	18.7 million	7.6 million
2003-Obasanjo	24.1 million	11.6 million
2007-Yar' Adua	24.6 million	18 million
2011-Jonathan	22.6 million	10.4 million
2015-Buhari	15.4 million	2.6 million
2019-Buhari	15.1 million	3.9 million
2023-Tinubu	8.79 million	2 million

Source: INEC data@thecable.ng

BVAS also produced a third force in the Nigerian electoral process. Hitherto, Nigerian elections were a contest between the APC and the PDP that were the dominant parties in the

country. But with the introduction of BVAS in the 2023 general election, the Labour Party (LP) a greenhorn unknown with national spread sprang up a surprise and became a force to reckon within national politics. The result of the 2023 Presidential election released by INEC shows that APC's Ahmed Tinubu won with 8,794,726 votes representing 36.61% of the total votes cast; Atiku Abubakar, PDP got 6,984,520 votes to come second. While, Peter Obi of the LP scored 6,101,533 votes to come third. Rabi'u Kwankwaso, of the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP) got 1,496,687 votes to be placed fourth. This is a clear manifestation that the election represented the wishes and aspirations of Nigerians reflected through the keen competition. Prior to this, elections in Nigeria were a one-way traffic between the PDP and APC and the rest of the parties were mere on-lookers as they made an infinitesimal impact in general elections.

BVAS indeed made a difference in the electoral process by churning out the accurate number of voters that voted in the election as against previous experience of inflation of votes. However, there were still some challenges associated with the introduction of this technological gizmo. A major challenge was the inability of BVAS to recognize and accredit voters who acquired their PVCs over a long time. Many voters reported that they were disenfranchised because their features had changed in the intervening years. In Anambra State where it was first experimented, for instance it was observed by Odinkalu (2023) that voters recently registered in INEC's Continuing Voter Registration (CVR) were the most easily accredited because their features were current. However, older voters or voters whose PVCs were a few years back generally reported serious problems with accreditation, mostly because their features had changed in the intervening years between data capture and accreditation which resulted to thousands of voters been disenfranchised.

Human environmental factors also played a major role in undermining the effectiveness of BVAS in the 2023 general elections. It is a fact that systems/machines do not work for themselves, they are made to work. In situations where human environmental systems are inimical to the normal working of a system, no matter its excellence of design, it will not work optimally. Technology therefore needs complementary systems. In Nigeria, politicians so obsessed with rigging to win elections at all cost often hire thugs to snatch electoral materials from electoral officers on the election day. In many states such as Nasarawa, many BVAS machines were reportedly snatched away from electoral officers on the election day. Many ballot papers were destroyed in Lagos State. The social media also did not help matters and

were busy posting result of the elections to the public on social media platforms instead of waiting for result to be uploaded to INEC official website from the polling units using BVAS. All these infractions point to the fact that notwithstanding how excellent technological inventions are designed if the complementary human environment is inimical to it, the system will not work optimally. The efficacy of technological solutions is therefore a function of conducive human environmental factors.

Some other human environmental factors that came to play to undermine the credibility of the electoral process include attempts to hack into INEC result viewing portal, network failure and poorly trained INEC ad hoc staff. Some of the ad hoc staff that were trained by INEC were replaced by INEC with some that were not trained on the eve of the election which contributed in making it difficult for results to be uploaded to INEC server through BVAS by some field staff. This made it difficult for INEC to upload the results to its result viewing portal immediately after the election thereby undermining the efficacy of BVAS.

5. CONCLUSION

This study is a chronicle of the nature of elections in Nigeria since independence in 1960. It has analyzed the problems bedeviling the conduct of elections in the country since the First Republic through to the Fourth Republic. It has also x-rayed the reforms introduced in the electoral system by the electoral management body, INEC through technological innovation to stem rigging, enhance public confidence in elections and deepen democratic consolidation. The emphasis of the discourse is on BVAS which was introduced as an improved technological innovation to consolidate on the gains recorded by the Card Reader introduced by INEC in 2015 to verify the Permanent Voters Card (PVC). BVAS was introduced by INEC in the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria to serve as identification solution for voter registration and tallying the votes with the accredited voters. Its common modalities include both finger print recognition and facial recognition. The study found out that BVAS was instrumental in correcting many imperfections associated with previous elections. In the first place, BVAS demystified incumbency advantage as many incumbents lost the election. BVAS also produced a third force in the Nigerian electoral process as Labour Party came to fore as one of the leading political parties in the country. Above all, millions of votes earlier declared in previous elections through inflation of votes were reduced as less number of votes were recorded in the 2023 general election against the 2015 and 2019 general elections in spite of population growth and increase in the number of polling units.

However, to consolidate on the successes recorded by BVAS and to improve in subsequent elections, it is suggested that, voter education should be intensified to improve a conducive human environment for this technological innovation to work optimally since it is only human beings that can be held responsible for the failure to have free and fair elections and not machines. Also, the activities of the social media need to be regulated during the conduct of elections as regards to voter accreditation and declaration of results.

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