

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND CREDIBLE ELECTION IN NIGERIA: EVIDENCE FROM THE 2019 ELECTION

¹Abubakar Abdullahi and ²Abubakar Musa Kalgo

¹Department of Political Science, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto

²Department of Political Science, Federal University Gusau

Corresponding Author's email: abuabdu484@gmail.com



Abstract

The conduct of credible election is often described as a pre-condition for the stability of democratic governance. This is because credible election has the potential of providing quality leadership, increase government legitimacy and contribute towards its sustenance. Perhaps, this explains why credible election has been described as an instrument of measuring quality of governance and development, especially in developing democracies. Arguably, African fledgling democracies have been trying to conduct credible elections in the last two to three decades but with little progress. This paper investigates the application of election digital technology and the extent to which it influences credible election in Nigeria. Three components of election technology which include the card reader machine, voter register, and electronic transmission of result were used to measure election credibility which is define in this paper as inclusiveness, transparency and accountability. Using qualitative data, the study revealed that election technology has changed the pattern and layers of electoral process but did not significantly improve transparency and accountability of electoral process. Though, the study found that the number of voters have increased to over eighty-four million however, the quality of voters' register was low as there were reported cases of missing names and wrong demographic information of voters. It was also found out that voters' turnout was the lowest since 1999 as thirty- four percent of the registered voters participated in the election as against forty-four percent during the 2015 election. The adopted technology as the study shows could neither detect nor resist cases of multiple and under-age voting, proxy-voting, and manipulation which were very much prevalent during the 2019 election. These challenges have contributed to citizen's distrust on INEC organizational capacity to conduct credible election in Nigeria. It also gave rise to the increase in the rate of election litigations at election tribunals to over eight hundred after the election. Thus, the paper recommends comprehensive review of the 2010 electoral act to accommodate complete digitalization of electoral process in Nigeria. It also recommends the development of a fortified and automated data bank for all registered voters so as to detect and filter out multiple voting and under-age voters as well as guard against manipulation of collation process. This will go a long way in ensuring inclusiveness, accountable and transparent electoral process in the country.

Keywords: digital technology, democracy, credible election, political parties

Introduction

The conduct of credible election is often described as a precondition for the stability and development of democratic governance. As an important pillar for the practice of democracy,

credible election distinguishes democratic from non-democratic regimes and is often described as the hall mark of a responsible government. In recent times, development agencies and donor countries developed variables to measure credibility of election as an instrument of national development, especially in developing democracies. They regularly channelled significant percentage of their development assistance towards credible election as a driver for democratic consolidation. This explains why the conduct of credible election is becoming an important instrument for foreign policy among nations and international institutions. Impliedly, relations among nations is partly conditioned on the quality and credibility of election and democratic governance.

Arguably, African fledgling democracies have been battling with how to conduct credible elections. Elections in variety of African democracies were often characterized by irregularities and fraud which in some cases led to political violence, civil wars or state collapse (Ayoade, 1998). Poorly organized elections have more often than not led to civil unrest in countries such as Burundi, Kenya, Nigeria and the Gambia. In this regard, the introduction of election technology was seen as part of general governance reforms to overcome the challenges associated with poorly managed elections in Africa. The overall objectives of election technology reforms were to among others reduce the incidence of electoral fraud, increase political participation and by extension consolidate democracy. However, given the experiences of how election technology is manipulated in some countries, scholars have continuously debated on the extent to which technology could guarantee election credibility particularly improving voters' inclusiveness, accountability and transparency of electoral process. For instance, series of accusations and counter accusations on election meddling of the 2016 general elections in the United States have raised questions about the capacity of election technology in ensuring credible election. In the same vain, the reported cases of manipulation of election technology in the 2017 Kenya's Presidential election and the subsequent decision of the constitutional court of the country affirming the manipulation demonstrate the inability of technology to ensure election credibility.

Exploring the experience of the 2019 Presidential election, this paper investigates the extent to which election technology guarantee credible election in Nigeria. It is however, significant to note that election credibility has different dimensions and components and thus somewhat complex and difficult to determine. In fact, studies revealed that scholars have developed over fifty variables of election credibility including but not limited to voter turn-out, political finance, voter registration, election result administration, respect for the rule law, and staff professionalism (IFES, 2014; Simplice and Nicholas, 2018). However, in the context of this paper, election credibility is measured in terms of the ability of election technology to promote inclusiveness in terms of voters' registration and turnout, transparency and accountability of result transmission process. The paper thus examines how and in what ways the introduction of card reader machine, electronic voter register and transmission of results expand the political space and ensure transparency as well as accountability of the 2019 election in Nigeria. To achieve its objectives, the paper is divided into five sections. Section one is this introduction, two is a theoretical discourse on digital technology and democratization process. Section three discuss the evolution and development of election technology in Nigeria, four discuss election technology and credibility of 2019 election and the last section concludes the paper with some useful policy recommendations.

Digital technology and democratization process: a discourse

Digital technology or Information and communication technology (ICT) is gradually becoming an important part of democratization process. It is a governance innovation developed to simplify democratization process and by extension ensure transparency and widen the political space. According to Gilardi (2016) digital technology including social media have changed the way political actors mobilize support, as well as the ways citizens participate in politics. It facilitates and serves as alternative channels for civic engagement through the creation of political chat rooms, electronic voting, referenda issues, mobilization and revitalizing levels of mass participation in public affairs (Norris, 2001). The emergence of digital technology in democratization process has created what she further described as virtual political system or community with large followers across countries. The global interconnectedness of digital technology has transformed citizens into global journalists with opportunities to share and interact with each other domestic and global political events as they unfold. It provides the citizens with platforms for mobilization against authoritarian and un-democratic regimes. In addition, digital technology is used in governance parlance to influence policy making and draw the attention of political leadership on domestic and global issues such as human rights violations, domestic insurgencies, terrorism, health pandemics and state repression against minorities. The foregoing arguments clearly indicates how digital technology is gradually shaping and influencing every aspect of human interactions and thus essential tool for consolidating governance and development.

Scholars have developed three major perspectives to explain the significance of digital technology to democratization process. The first group of scholars were those who belongs to the development school and underscored the importance of technology as a driver for knowledge economy. Rustishvili (2012) maintained that the development of knowledge economy is a product of digital revolution which brought about significant changes not only on how people communicate, but also to the broad political and economic landscapes. These changes brought about globalization of states and their institution including democracy promotion and foreign direct investment into developing countries (Addison and Heshmati, 2004). Digital technology removes all forms of barriers among states and thus, create a strong link between technology, democratic governance and foreign direct investment to the extent that each influence and affects one another in significant ways. Such influence is making technology an instrument of every day's life. The utility of technology and its frequent usage in every day's life increases the potential of domestic and foreign investment in terms of security and return on investment. Li and Resnick (2003) argued that economic and political development depend on minimal level of information technology infrastructure which has significantly brought about rapid technological gains and strengthen quality of governance. Impliedly the increasing presence of technological innovations creates the potential for economic development and democratization. Technology is therefore an important ingredient for state development as it provides citizens with array of opportunities to participate in economic and political development of their societies. In this regard, state need to develop and apply technology in governance to secure investment, institute transparency and promote inclusiveness in governance. This will expand the political space and attract foreign investors with direct link to employment generation and poverty reduction.

The second approach concerning the link between technology and democratization is the technological approach. This approach aligned itself with the works of Karl Deutch and other political communication theorists. According to this school of thoughts, political

communication is undergoing rapid transformation process with significant influence on citizens participation in the political process. This transformation stemmed from citizens' disenchantment with the older forms of civic engagement and participation as well as the increase in speed and reduction of cost of communication. Micheletti (n.d) argued that communication is no longer a way of getting across messages, it is an action in its own right. Like other forms of participation, communication mobilizes and structure political thought and engagement, influence internal and external workings of political and social movements, corporations, and other political actors. For instance, the social media have played significant role towards mobilization for the success of 2010 Arab Springs in the Middle East. The movement began with few citizens but later transformed into mass political movement which led to regime change in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. This shows that the availability of communication infrastructure provides free and limitless information and could strengthen as well as broaden citizens' involvement in public affairs. In fact, social media remove barriers to political participation and civic engagement. In this regard, digital technology could be said to have shape and/or influence the way citizens relates with the state and its effects on quality of governance and democracy. In fact, cheapness and accessibility of social media has raise citizens' political behavior as well as their participation in the political process. Even though, access to social media in developing democracies is partly expensive and have been use as tools for the production of fake news and hate speeches, empirical evidence did suggest that increase in speed and relative reduction of cost of communication is making social media attractive among the electorates. It is arguably becoming an integral part of physical infrastructure more closely tied to political, economic, and socio-cultural development than roads, bridges and irrigation among others. This is evident in the way technology infrastructure such as cellular telephones, broadband development via cable television, social media as well as high level investment in science and technology is prioritized in developing countries and is currently adopted in every aspect of governance. Technology infrastructure provide free and limitless information, strengthen and broaden citizens' involvement in public affairs and thus remove hitherto barriers to political participation and civic engagement. Thus, as African countries strives towards democratic consolidation, the use of technology in governance is essential for the creation of awareness on issues related to leadership choice, policy preference and other forms of civic duties.

The third perspective is democratic perspective and is more or less an extension of the technological approach which shows the primacy of technology in democratization process. The democratic perspective opined that the use of digital technology and its benefits in governance depend on the nature and the character of a political system. The theorists argued that among all forms of governments, democratic system is the only system of governance which permit and accept technology innovations as the best way of improving political processes. This is because it is only in democratic systems that citizens political participation and equality were recognized as fundamental values which could guarantee quality leadership. These values could further be actualized through the adoption of digital technology in political and governance processes. Empirical evidence suggests that digital technology in most democracies is adopted to ensure greater transparency in decision making process and provide opportunities for interaction and mobilization in election campaigns (Norris, 2001). In this regard, there would always be far more opportunities for civic engagements and public debates in democracies where technology is consistently used than in fragile and/or authoritarian political systems where technology is either underdeveloped or completely absent.

The growing influence of technology in democratization process paved way for the proliferation of social media in the electoral process. Social media networking websites such as the Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are used for political engagements to citizens (Funk, 2013). It is worthy to note that these platforms provide opportunity for online political discourse on integrity of political process especially, information concerning electoral process. It is however, significant to note while in some democracies, social media has encourage respect for the rule of law, reduce corruption, increase transparency and raise the integrity of elections, in some others, reverse has been the case where social media has been infiltrated with fake news and hate speeches leading to governance instability. More so, in fragile democracies with clientelist political leadership, social media have suffered different forms of intimidation and tight censorship from the state due largely to the leadership desire to control and maintain power. In such democracies, citizens were either given limited access or completely denied access to social media platforms. Private media outfits were not also left out as many of them which provide alternate platforms for civic engagements were witch-hunt by the state agents. Therefore, the application of technology in governance depend to some extent on the type and the character of political leadership including the laws and regulations governing the use of technology.

Regardless of the theoretical position one aligns himself to, it is pertinent to note that various theoretical and empirical perspectives have their shortcomings particularly if we take into consideration the realities of developing democracies such as Nigeria. The development of fake news and hate speeches during election period and manipulation of technology by corrupt public officials with the aid of cyber experts/criminals' attest to some of the negative consequences of technology innovations in democratisation process. Nonetheless, it is noticeable that digital technology has significantly influences certain aspects of democratization process. The technology is now being use by the citizens, politicians and political parties to impacts democracy and representative institutions.

Evolution and development of election digital technology in Nigeria

The adoption of digital technology in Nigeria's electoral process is a recent development and was partly influenced by domestic and external pressure for electoral reforms in the country. It began at the peak of 2003 election with the introduction of Optical Magnetic Recognition Forms (OMR) and Automated Finger Print Identification System (AFIS). These are basic computer identification tools developed to detect and clean up the registration process for to the production of reliable voters' register. They were equally designed to reduce or eliminate voter impersonation, multiple registration and voting as well as result manipulation at collation centres. It is significant to note at this point that credible election is a by-product of efficient voters' register. Such voters' register contains adequate and reliable information of the voters including their images, biometric and demographic information among others. The objective of voters' register is to expands the political space and promote inclusiveness of the minorities as well as the vulnerable in the electoral process and by extension give legitimacy to political leadership. Regrettably, the OMR and AFIS technologies could not provide a standard and reliable voter register for the 2003 election due to absence of some of the above transparency ingredients. For instance, empirical evidence shows that in some states voter images on the register are not clear and their demographic information either wrongly written or not provided at all. The maintenance of other traditional voting systems such as the use of paper ballot system marred by human errors further aggravated the efficiency of the adopted technology during the 2003 election.

The foregoing prevailing condition which characterized the 2003 election compelled the Nigeria's INEC to continue to search for better ways to improve the electoral process. In this regard, INEC supplied additional twenty-two thousand Direct Date Capture Machine (DDCM), thirteen thousand integrated data capture systems and eighteen thousand revalidation devices. In addition, Very Small Aperture Terminal (V-SAT) technology was installed for easy transmission of result. The essence of acquiring V-SAT technology is to eliminate multiple registration and avoid falsification of result at the collation process. Following this development, the electoral commission registered over sixty-one million voters in 2006 for the conduct of 2007 general elections. Regrettably operational problems, non-availability of the DDCM and V-SAT technology across the country, erratic power supply and incompetent personnel affected the quality of 2007 general elections. In fact, the 2007 general election was described as the worst election in Nigeria's political history as a result of high level of election irregularities including manipulation of election technology for political interest.

Given the challenges faced by INEC in the 2007 general election, the commission made several efforts to upgrade and acquire more election technology infrastructure in preparation for the 2011 election. The commission acquired additional one hundred and thirty-two DDCM, upgrade AFIS and EVR with a view to improving the quality of voters' register for 2011 election. It also developed electronic mail system for transmission of election result which incidentally coincide with the proliferation of social media platforms in Nigeria's election. However operational and technical problems arising from low quality of the DDCM, power shortage, internet connectivity problems and infiltration of fake transmission of election results on social media affects the credibility of the 2011 election.

The quest for improving election technology continued arising from the citizens disenchantment with the previous efforts. In this regard, INEC further upgrade AFIS, adopt business rule as well as introduce voter identification system known as smart card reader for the production of permanent voters' card (PVC). The introduction of smart card reader was described as a major breakthrough towards credible election in the country. It was introduced to ensure transparency and accountability of voters register and result transmission process. The smart card reader has in-built mechanism which divide the accreditation process into three phases which comprises of voter identification, verification and authentication. First, voter identification is meant to determine an eligible voter in terms of age and residency within an electoral area; the second is voter verification which is to ascertain originality of the voters card and the third is voter authentication which is meant to compare stored finger prints with that of the voter on the day of the election. The introduction of these layers of accreditation is to filter out unqualified voters and eliminate all forms of voting irregularities. To further guard against election irregularities after voting process, election result sheets are to be scanned and uploaded on the Election Transparency Administration and Collation (e-TRAC) platform. Consequently, e-collection website for collation and transmission of results was developed to ensure that results are directly generated from the polling units. The essence is to have a coordinated technology that will resist all forms of result manipulation and guarantee transparency of the electoral process. Unfortunately, the e-TRAC platform could not be employed for transmission of result during the 2015 election due to operational challenges compounded by shortage of power supply, non-availability of smart card readers and failure in some polling units. The foregoing narratives attest that the major objectives of election technology in Nigeria were to better voter identification, improve voting process and ensure efficient vote count and transmission of election results. Unfortunately, little attention is given to other forms of election irregularities which have multiplier effects on the

technology and by extension the conduct of credible election in the country. Nonetheless, the introduction of election technology in Nigeria could be regarded as an important milestone in the history and the development of election in the country.

Election technology and credibility of 2019 election in Nigeria

The Nigeria's 2019 general election is the sixth in the series of elections since the return of democratic governance in 1999. The election was held in the first quarter of 2019 and was divided into two phases. The first phase comprises of the Presidential and National Assembly election which was held on 23rd February 2019. The second is Governorship and State Houses of Assembly election which was held on 9th March 2019. Available data after the election revealed that the number of registered voters has increased from sixty-eight million during the 2015 election to over eighty-four million voters. This shows that there was over thirteen percent increase of registered voters in the last four years. The increased was influenced by a combination of domestic and external factors which include the quest for national development, the proliferation of civil society organizations and the growing popularity of democracy among the citizens as the best form of government. Unfortunately, this increase in voters' registration did not reflect in the voters' turnout as little over twenty-six million representing over thirty-four percent of the registered voters cast their votes during the Presidential election. This is slightly lower than twenty-eight million representing over forty-three percent during the 2015 Presidential election (INEC, 2019; IRI/NDI, 2019). In fact, it could be argued that voter turnout during the 2019 election is considered to be the lowest since the return of democratic rule in 1999. The low turnout of voters in the election, though, a product of many factors could be connected to the hostile and frustrating election environment experienced by the voters and aggravated by the technical and operational challenges linked to the adopted election technology. For instance, evidence abound shows that the card reader machines did not have the required operational capacity to verify voters in less than forty second as insinuated by the electoral commission. The technology could not ascertain the identity of some voters due to technical hitches experienced during the voting process. Put simply, images and demographic information of voters both on the voters register and permanent voters' card (PVCs) were either not readable, omitted or spelt wrongly. This shows that the technology did not have the quality in terms of speed and storage capacity to ensure that only eligible voters are allowed to vote. Arising from this development, polling officials' resort to manual accreditation without proper documentation in the incidence forms provided by the electoral commission. This paved way for proxy and multiple voting as well as increase in the rate of vote buying in many polling units across the country. These problems denied voters particularly the vulnerable and minorities their right to vote and thus becomes frustrated and eventually left the polling units either halfway the voting process or before it begins.

The technical challenges of the card reader machine have also affected the quality and security of voters' register. According to the 2010 electoral act and the 2019 election guidelines, voters' register is to be produced from the data stored in the card reader machine during voters' registration process. In this regard, only voters who are captured by the machine will be on the register and thus qualified to vote in an election. Although, voters' registers were available in most polling units during the election, the registers however failed to satisfy transparency and accountability requirements as the registers were printed on ordinary duplicating paper without basic quality and security features required for a sensitive national document. This is apart from complains raised by some voters of their names been

wrongly spelt or omitted or could not be completely seen on the voters' register. While voters themselves might have contributed to the problems because of their inability to check their names during display of voters' register, it clearly shows that the display and update exercises by INEC before the 2019 election was a waste of public resources and thus an exercise in futility. All these put together suggest that there are clear violations of election transparency and safety standards which significantly contributed to low turnout and by implication reduce the level of political inclusiveness during the 2019 election.

Apart from the capacity problems of the election technology, deliberate human errors and manipulation of the technology by election officials also affects the credibility of the 2019 election. It is evident that there were deliberate cases of biometric manipulation, malfunction and non-use of card reader machines during the election. It is significant to note that biometric is a key components of card reader machine and is design to check proxy or multiple voting in an election. It is a tool which authenticate the identity of voters using instrument of finger prints, which are difficult to counterfeit (Iwuoha, 2018). According to Jega (2015), biometric which is part of the card reader technology is to guard against voter impersonation and ensure that non-accredited voters are not allowed to vote. It is however evident that some election officials manipulate the biometric tool and connive with politicians to alter election results during the collation process. This compromising attitude make it difficult to detect multiple voting and infiltration of underage or non-accredited voters during result transmission process. The deliberate manipulation of election technology and its incapacity to detect unqualified voters rendered the entire election technology reforms insignificant in the Nigeria's electoral process.

It is however important to note that a number of reasons might have contributed to the unethical conduct exhibited by some polling officials. The unlimited powers granted to registration area technicians, collation and returning officers in the handling of card reader machines undermine the capacity of the machine to ensure credible election. The unprecedented powers of elections officials gave the opportunity to determine what to be collated and inputted into the machine. Deliberate and discriminatory cases of result alteration and changes from the card reader by election officials were experienced in different parts of the country. Ironically, neither the 2019 election guidelines nor the 2010 electoral Act make any provision for litigation against electoral officials involved in the manipulation of election technology. In this regard, litigation could not be established against those that manipulate election technology let's alone admitting it as evidence in election tribunals and courts. The argument by some political parties at the election tribunal after the 2019 election that results submitted to parties by party agents are different from what was announced by the electoral commission, some voters have not been accredited with the card reader machine and the commission did not transmit election result electronically remain important questions challenging the capacity of election technology and the credibility of the 2019 election in Nigeria.

Evidently, the Nigeria's 2019 election experience revealed that absence of clearly define legal rules and frameworks could render election technology insignificant and thus pave way for electoral fraud by political gladiators and their collaborators. In addition, the conduct of 2019 election further exposes INEC incapacity to deal with the potential challenges of election technology in the country. Little wonder that neither the electoral commission nor security agencies could have the capacity to detect and/or prevent manipulation of the election technology during result transmission. In fact, result transmission itself particularly at the

state and local levels was marred by widespread procedural irregularities ranging from manipulation to outright cancellation of election figures. This suggest that the transmission process cannot be considered credible and therefore there is no confidence in the result of the 2019 election.

The foregoing discourse affirmed the assertion of Cheeseman et al (2018) that the growing use of technology in the conduct of election has been driven by its fetishization rather than by rigorous assessment of its effectiveness in ensuring the credibility of election. Therefore, election technology may not be a solution to the problems of elections irregularities as evident in the Nigeria's 2019 election. This is because in spite of its adoption, Nigeria's electoral process is still weak, distorted with fake election news and characterized with all forms of electoral fraud with negative implications on democratic governance. The inability of election technology to improve election has affected public trust on political leadership and further compounds the problems of legitimacy crisis in the country. It has also affected citizens' trust on organizational capacity of INEC to conduct credible election in the country. It is evident that the commission failed to make adequate preparation in terms of organizational and manpower needs for credible 2019 election. As an important institution of governance, citizens were dissatisfied with its performance as evident in the continued quest for electoral reforms, gradual decline of voter turnout as well as the rise in the number of elections petition to over eight hundred cases after the 2019 election.

Conclusion

This paper examines election technology and its capacity to increase inclusiveness, guarantee transparency, accountability and competitiveness of election in Nigeria. Exploring the experience of Nigeria's 2019 elections, the paper concludes that the introduction of election technology has increase the number of registered voters in Nigeria but it has failed to increase voter turnout in the country. It also concludes that election technology did not prevent fraud or reduce election vulnerability citing cases of technology manipulation, multiple and proxy voting as well as unorganized result collation process particularly at the state and local levels. This affirmed the assertion of some scholars that the adoption of election technology is not a major solution to the problems of elections credibility in developing democracies. Thus, the technology only provides opportunity for voters to register and provide information at minimal cost to the electorates. Arising from the foregoing, election technology could not reduce or eliminate electoral fraud as evident in the 2019 election in Nigeria. However, to strengthen election technology for credible election, the paper recommends the review of Nigeria's electoral act and guidelines to accommodate some of the grey areas which affected the use of election technology in Nigeria. There is the need for complete digitalization of electoral process linking voters register with voters' card and the voting process. This requires among others a fortified central data bank for the production of standard and safe voters register to be produce by Nigeria's security printing and minting company. The paper recommends further improvement and upgrade of election technology to reduce the infiltration of fake news into election data and guard against manipulation and falsification of result during election transmission process. However, these could not be achieved without aggressive institutional reforms particularly regular and periodic professionalization of manpower to address the problems of unethical conduct among staff of the Nigeria's electoral commission. The commission should rather than embark on massive procurement of election technology focus its attention on potential challenges of the technology and technology related logistic problems. This will no

doubt raise public trust on the commission and its capacity to ensure inclusive, transparent and accountable election in Nigeria.

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