

## EFFECTS OF E-ELECTIONS ON CREDIBLE AND SAFE ELECTIONS IN POST COVID-19 NIGERIA.

**Chidi Ukomadu**

Department of Public Administration,  
Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State Nigeria  
E-Mail: chidi.ukomadu@fulokoja.edu.ng  
08065396061, 09055368773

**Obera Victoria Ahonya**

School of Management Studies  
Department of Office Technology Management  
Kogi State Polytechnic Lokoja  
E-Mail: vicobera4u@gmail.com  
08065687655

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### Abstract

*The world woke up to a new pandemic code-named COVID-19 at the tail end of 2019. Its rate of spread was so alarming and in order to reign-in and flatten the curve of the spread, most activities world over, Nigeria inclusive were shut down. Gradually, the global socio-economic and political activities are opening up again but a new set of protocol will have to be adhered to in order to reduce the rate of transmission, especially as a vaccine is yet to be developed against the disease. In Nigeria for example, two governorship elections and other rerun elections will be taking place this year in order to avoid a constitutional issue but to achieve this without endangering the lives of the citizens who may troop out in their large numbers to fulfill their constitutional duties and rights should be of grave concern to the government, the electoral body and health authorities. The objective of this paper therefore is to explore a credible, acceptable and safe way of conducting elections in Nigeria now and in the future. Content Analysis was adopted as the methodology of this study, it concluded that to lend credibility to the electoral process and also make it safe, e-election will have to be adopted. Some of the recommendations include: The President should as a matter of urgency sign the 2018 Electoral Bill which provided for e-elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission should adopt full electronic voting in the electoral process from registration to announcement of the election results.*

**Key words:** General Elections, COVID-19, Card Reader, e-Election, INEC

### Introduction

COVID-19 or Corona virus disease pandemic that debuted on our shores in February 2020, has exposed a lot of ill-preparedness in our general ways of conducting business, not only in Nigeria but the world over. It has exposed how unprepared we are for a major emergency, how unprepared and ill-equipped our health care system is, how fragile our mono-cultural economy is, how inadequate our educational curriculum is, and the need to overhaul our electoral system among other things. As the viral disease is still very much with us without a vaccine or any proven and approved drug by the World Health Organisation (WHO), there is anxiety among the citizens, the government and health authorities in Nigeria on the best way to go about the issues of elections that will be acceptable, credible and safe at the same time without exposing the health of the citizens to grave danger.

This study came at a more auspicious time, given the havoc, anxiety and health concerns the pandemic has caused world over and the safety of the electorate as they file out to fulfill their civic responsibility by participating in elections. This therefore calls for a new protocol, an overhaul of our electoral system that will put the health safety of the voters in consideration while fulfilling this all important civic rights and duties.

Electoral system and timetable in Nigeria is fixed by the laws of the land, it is the law that determines the time frame when elections will be held and it will be legal and when it will be outside the provisions of the law, thereby making it illegal, for instance by virtue of the provisions of Section 178 (2) Constitution, and Section 25 (8) of the Electoral Act, Election into the office of a State Governor shall hold not earlier than One Hundred and Fifty (150) days and not later than Thirty (30) days before the expiration of the term of office of the last holder of the office. The Commission is by virtue of Section 30 (1) of the Electoral Act, expected to issue notice for the election not later than ninety (90) days before the date of the election. The tenure of the Governor of Edo State will expire on the 11th day of November, 2020. Pursuant to the provisions of Section 178 (1) and (2) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) and Section 25 (7) and (8) of the Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended), the earliest date for

Election into the office of Governor, Edo State, shall be the 15th day of June, 2020 and the latest date for the Election shall be 13th Day of October, 2020 (This Day, 2020). Considering the provisions of the electoral laws as spelt out above, what happens if the COVID-19 curve in Nigeria refuses to flatten and keep soaring, what will happen to future elections? Will the electoral body go ahead with the election and risk exposing the citizens to health hazards or will the election be postponed and create a constitutional issue? Even Edo state at the moment, there is a law banning the gathering of more than twenty people at the same time, how can an election hold under such an atmosphere? This is a time for all stakeholders- the government, the electoral umpire, the law makers and even the citizenry to come together and fashion out an electoral system that will not be affected by such unforeseen circumstance in the future as is the case as the moment, where traditional paper ballot is used, with people gathering and queuing for hours on end, in order to cast their votes. During the global lockdown as a result of the pandemic, online shopping or using ICT in the buying and selling of essential commodities were still taking place on daily basis. The problem of this paper is to explore how the new normal of social distancing to curtail the spread of covid-19 and free, fair and credible election will be achieved in subsequent elections in Nigeria, using e-elections.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this paper therefore, is to explore the adoption of e-elections in subsequent elections in Nigeria in order to reduce the time spent at the polling booths, thereby reducing the possibility of contracting and spreading the corona virus and equally attain free, free and credible election in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual framework**

#### **Election**

Nnoli in Obi (2017), sees election as the process of choice agreed upon by a group of people, it enables them to select one or a few out of many to occupy one or a number of authority positions. To him, the process of choice usually involves the rules and regulations designed to ensure a certain degree of fairness and justice to all concerned. It is the most modern form of recruitment of personnel into offices and it is deemed to be very crucial aspect of the democratic process, irrespective of the type of democracy that is practiced. To Obikeze and Obi (2004), elections are means by which the people of a country, organization or union choose and exercise some degree of control over their representatives. It is the way every citizen participates in government. Dunmoye (2010) opines that election is the process of selection of one person or more for an office. He stressed further that election is also a government administered process by which people, whether opposed or unopposed, seek a political party's nomination for, or election to public office.

In modern times, elections are the legitimate way by which governments can claim the right to power. In the view of Akther (2001), cited in Odofin (2005), elections are considered as one of the basic pillars of democracy and central to the process of democratic political participation. In the words of Gauba (2004), in a representative democracy, election is the process by which the members of a community or organization choose one or more persons to exercise authority on their behalf. The provision of election in a democracy is intended to ensure that the government will exercise its power with the consent of the governed. In other words, elections lend legitimacy to the authority of the government, this source of legitimacy is regarded so important in the modern age that some non-democratic or totalitarian systems also try to legitimize their authority through façade of elections. Gauba (2004), however avers that the real test of a genuine election is whether the voters have real alternatives before for exercising their choice or not.

#### **Free and Fair Election**

Election on its own cannot achieve the purpose it was intended unless it is free and fair. Dibie (2008) sees free and fair election as an election conducted according to the principles and rules of democracy. This simply means, the people of a given country must be free without coercion to elect their leaders under a condition that is most favourable and conducive. To Oyeneye, Onyenwenu and Olosunde (2011), free and fair elections refers to elections conducted without incidents of rigging or electoral fraud and in which eligible voters are free to vote for the candidates and political parties of their choice without coercion or intimidation. Dibie (2018) and Oyeneye, Onyenwenu and Olosunde (2011), mentioned conditions that must be present for an election to be adjudged free and fair and they include: Preparation of voters register, display of voters register, periodic revision of voters register, delimitation of constituencies, periodic and regular elections, independent judiciary, unfettered access to courts, independence of the electoral commission, right to campaign, impartiality of electoral officials, secret balloting, absence of intimidation, counting of votes under strict supervision, political education of the electorate, non-proxy voting, just and adequate electoral laws, equality of citizens, training of officials and provision of election materials etc.

## e-VOTING

**Electronic voting** (also known as **e-voting**) is voting that uses electronic means to either aid or take care of casting and counting votes. Depending on the particular implementation, e-voting may use standalone electronic voting machines (also called EVM or computers connected to the internet). It may encompass a range of Internet services, from basic transmission of tabulated results to full-function online voting through common connectable household devices. The degree of automation may be limited to marking a paper ballot, or may be a comprehensive system of vote input, vote recording, data encryption and transmission to servers, and consolidation and tabulation of election results. A worthy e-voting system must perform most of these tasks while complying with a set of standards established by regulatory bodies, and must also be capable to deal successfully with strong requirements associated with security, accuracy, integrity, swiftness, privacy, audibility, accessibility, cost effectiveness, scalability and ecological sustainability. Using electronic voting instead of traditional paper voting is now becoming a popular technology nowadays all over the world. Advances in communication technology can make geographically distant places to be closer and seamlessly accessible. With the use of electronic voting technology, people who are away from the voting booth as well as physically infeasible to come to the polling station can also cast their vote easily. Only the basic understanding to use electronic voting machine or electronic voting web site is needed. However, with the aid of new technologies, now people can cast their votes even from their mobile phones. Internet voting is one of the most feasible electronic voting systems.

According to NeOo and Aung (2014), Internet voting can be divided into three general categories as follows:

**Poll-site Internet voting:** It offers the promise of greater convenience and efficiency in that voters could cast their ballots from any poll site, and the tallying process would be both fast and certain. More importantly, since election officials would control both the voting platform and the physical environment, managing the security risks of such systems is feasible.

**Kiosk voting:** Voting machines would be located away from traditional polling places, in such convenient locations as malls, libraries, or schools. The voting platforms would still be under the control of election officials, and the physical environment could be modified as needed and monitored (e.g., by election officials, volunteers, or even cameras) to address security and privacy concerns, and prevent coercion or other forms of intervention.

**Remote Internet voting:** It seeks to maximize the convenience and access of the voters by enabling them to cast ballots from virtually any location that is Internet accessible. While this concept is attractive and offers significant benefits, it also poses substantial security risks and other concerns relative to civic culture. Current and near-term technologies are inadequate to address these risks. Electronic voting

According to USAID (2019), when discussing electronic voting, two separate but sometimes related technologies are generally referred to-

- Electronic voting
- Electronic counting.

Electronic voting and counting refers to the use of electronic technologies that assist or automate the voting and/or counting processes. In electronic voting, often called "e-voting," voters use an electronic device to make and record their ballot choices. Choices are recorded on the machine itself or the machine produces a token on which the choices are recorded, such as a magnetic card or a printout of the ballot choice. Electronic voting systems include electronic voting machines (EVMs) placed in polling stations, SMS voting and Internet voting. In electronic counting, part or all of the tabulation of results is automated. E-voting systems can be **remote** or **non-remote**, referring to whether the voters' ballot choices are transmitted to a central location (e.g. Internet or SMS voting) or recorded on a local medium (such as the EVM or a printed ballot). Systems will also be **supervised** or **unsupervised**, which relates to whether election staff are present to manage the voting process (e.g., if voting is done in a polling station) or not (such as Internet voting). The most common e-voting systems involve non-remote EVMs used in the supervised environment of the polling station. There are many key decisions that must be reached in adopting, designing, implementing and overseeing an e-voting system. Electronic voting and counting may offer a range of benefits to the conduct and administration of elections when strategically employed, but new technologies also present new challenges. Decision-making processes about all aspects of the use of technologies in elections should be transparent and consultative. If a decision to procure new technologies is reached, standards relating to transparent and competitive procurement should be upheld. Transparency in testing and certifying e-voting systems promotes credibility among election stakeholders such as political parties, the media, and civil society.

E-voting technologies also introduce new and important stakeholder groups to the electoral process who are responsible for providing, checking, or overseeing e-voting technologies, including technology vendors, academia, and IT experts. Election results should be **verifiable** and **auditable** to provide sufficient means for voters and stakeholders to verify that votes have been accurately recorded. Independent testing and certification of electronic voting and counting systems are essential tools that EMBs should use to guarantee the accuracy, security, and reliability of e-voting systems. The "source code" -- in some sense, the description of the underlying software system -- should be made available. In 2013, Estonia's Electronic Voting Committee released the entire source code of its voting server software. This step gave citizens a chance to understand their e-voting system more fully -- although requiring technical knowledge to do so -- but perhaps even more importantly, opened the door for interested programmers to help identify bugs in the system, strengthen its security and boost confidence in its capacities.

Citizens must be aware of any changes to the election-day process and voting procedures well in advance of election day, especially in cases in which a new and unfamiliar technology is introduced into the process. Citizens can easily lose faith in the integrity of the electoral process if they are not well-informed about or have confidence in technologies used in voting and counting. With access to information about electronic voting and counting, stakeholders can assess the integrity of the procurement of technologies, the recording of votes, and the tabulation of election results. With access to data about electronic voting and counting technologies, including the underlying source code, citizens, political parties, election observers, and other stakeholders can help improve electronic voting and counting technologies and promote confidence in their use.

#### **Methodology**

**This study adopted Content Analysis as its methodology with secondary data as its method of data collection. It reviewed the works of other authors on the subject matter from where conclusion was drawn**

#### **Review of Related Literature**

This segment will focus on the views of other authors on the issues of e-voting and free, credible and safe election, especially since the emergence of this global pandemic code-named Covid-19.

The 2007 Presidential election was seen by the international community, especially the United States of America as lacking in credibility and gave conditions for relating with the new government of President Umar Musa Yar'Adua. According to Abdullahi (2007), several weeks after Yar'Adua and Jonathan were sworn in, no major head of government called or wrote to congratulate them on the account of lack of credibility of the election that brought them in. This bothered the newly-elected President so much that he had to publicly declare his personal embarrassment, promising to overhaul the electoral system.

Yar'Adua inaugurated the National Electoral Reforms Committee within three months of taking power. The committee led by the former Chief Justice of the Federation, Muhammadu Uwais, submitted its report in December 2008, President Yar'Adua only sent a modified version to the National Assembly. After the death of President Yar'Adua, his erstwhile Vice-President- Goodluck Jonathan finally took over the reins of power as Acting President in March 2010. Jonathan had suffered the humiliation with Yar'Adua and therefore decided he was not going to allow his own mandate suffer a similar credibility problem. He promptly dusted up the unabridged version of the Uwais Committee report and sent it to the National Assembly. However, the National Assembly itself had concluded that allowing the judiciary to appoint the INEC Chairman would run contrary to the principle of separation of powers, since the judiciary was also responsible for hearing election petition cases, nothing was heard about the report after that. To convince the nation and the international community that he meant business about making future elections in Nigeria, free, fair and credible, President Jonathan appointed Prof. Attahiru Jega, a non-nonsense and non-conformist professor of political science as the chairman of the electoral board. In order to make the elections conducted by the electoral umpire free, fair and credible, the INEC adopted electronic government albeit partially, due to legal snags which made the full deployment of technology impossible, the outcome of the election was applauded world over for its transparency and for the first time in the political history of Nigeria, an incumbent president was voted out of office. This could be attributed to the fact that for the first time, the peoples' vote counted (Obi and Uzor, 2017).

The world expected the nation's electoral umpire to take the game up in the 2019 General election, having performed above average four years earlier, largely due to the adoption of a large dose of e-elections. But the report of various observer groups both locally and internationally suggested that the election was a charade and lacks creditability and its outcome later concluded at the courts. Given the fact that the pandemic will remain with humanity for some time without abating and the oncoming elections in some states in Nigeria soon, how will the safety of the electorate and the general public be guaranteed while the election remains credible, free and fair?

## Types of e-Voting

### Paper-Based Electronic Voting System

These originated as a system where votes are cast and counted by hand, using paper ballots. With the advent of electronic tabulation came systems where paper cards or sheets could be marked by hand, but counted electronically. These systems included punched card voting, marksense and later digital pen systems.

With punch-card voting systems, the ballot is a card or cards and the voters punch holes in it (with a supplied punch device next to their candidates or choice. After punching the hole(s), the voter may place the ballot in a ballot box or the voter may feed the ballot into an electronic vote tabulating device at the voting place (Esan and Ayeni, 2017).

### Direct-Recording Electronic (DRE) Voting System

A direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting machine records votes by means of a ballot display provided with mechanical or electro-optical components that can be activated by the voter (typically buttons or a touchscreen); that processes data with computer software; and that records voting data and ballot images in memory. After the election it produces a tabulation of the voting data stored in a removable memory component and as a printed copy. The system may also provide a means for transmitting individual ballots or vote totals to a central location for consolidating and reporting results from precincts at the central location. These systems use a precinct count method that tabulates ballots at the polling place. They typically tabulate ballots as they are cast and print the results after the close of polling.

In 2004, India adopted Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) for its elections to its parliament with 380 million voters casting their ballots using more than one million voting machines, also in the 2017 local government elections, Kaduna state adopted the Electronic Voting Machine (Esan and Ayeni, 2017)..

### Public Network DRE voting system

A public network DRE voting system is an election system that uses electronic ballots and transmits vote data from the polling place to another location over a public network. Vote data may be transmitted as individual ballots as they are cast, periodically as batches of ballots throughout the election day, or as one batch at the close of voting. This includes Internet voting as well as telephone voting. Public network DRE voting system can utilize either precinct count or central count method. The central count method tabulates ballots from multiple precincts at a central location. Internet voting can use remote locations (voting from any Internet capable computer) or can use traditional polling locations with voting booths consisting of Internet connected voting systems.

A 2020 study found that online voting reduced the amount of errors that voters made when casting ballots, thus reducing the number of ballots that were ineligible. Electronic voting systems may offer advantages compared to other voting techniques. An electronic voting system can be involved in any one of a number of steps in the setup, distributing, voting, collecting, and counting of ballots, and thus may or may not introduce advantages into any of these steps. Potential disadvantages exist as well including the potential for flaws or weakness in any electronic component. (Ejikemjumbo, 2015).

### Electronic Voting Systems in Different Countries

Electronic Voting in Ireland, the plans were all set for e-voting by touch screens in the Irish election for the European Parliament and their local elections in June 2004. Test projects had been run in 3 out of 42 voting districts during the 2002 elections, in which 138 011 e-votes were submitted. The Evaluation Commission appointed did not recommend the use of e-voting, however, so all plans were stopped pending further notice. The conclusion drawn by the Commission was not based on any findings to the effect that the system would not work. The

Electronic Voting in India Around 370 million Indian voters, (India has 675 million voters), submitted electronic votes in the all-electronic 2004 general election, One million electronic voting machines were distributed in a total of 800 000 polling stations. The machine had the size of a suitcase and consisted of two units: The control unit was administrated by the polling station staff, while the balloting unit was placed in the polling booth. The voters pressed the button next to a candidate's name. In addition, a symbol was provided next to the candidate's name. The investment of 800 000 voting machines amounted to 200 million US dollars. But the authorities will save around 10 000 tons of ballot paper for every future election. To minimize risks of a virus attack or hacking, the machines were not linked up to a network. Although the election was rated as a great success by the authorities, several critical questions were raised. The machines did not provide any printed receipt, which means that there was no way the results could be trailed. Another critical remark was that the source code was not open for inspection.

Electronic Voting in Norway Norwegian electronic voting system was mixnet type voting system.

Norwegian protocol included four players representing the electronic poll's infrastructure: a ballot box (B), a receipt generator (R), a decryption service (D) and an auditor (A). Each voter (V) could log in using a computer (P) in order to submit his vote. Channels between computers (voters) and the ballot box were considered as authenticated channel, channels between infrastructure's players were untappable channels and channel between voters and receipt generator was a unidirectional out-of-band channel. The protocol can be divided in three phases: the setting phase, the submission phase, where voters submitted their votes, and the counting phase, where ballots were counted and auditor verified the correctness of the election

### **Benefits of Electronic Voting Machine**

Electronic voting has many advantages over the traditional way of voting. Some of these advantages are lesser cost, faster tabulation of results, greater accuracy, and lower risk of human and mechanical errors, it offers improved accessibility for the people with disabilities, and it provides multiple-language support for the ballots. Electronic voting will increase voter convenience and voter confidence in the accuracy of election results. Electronic voting can provide convenient, efficient and secure facility for recording and tallying votes. It can be applied for a variety of types of election: from small scale campus election to large scale national election. Timeliness can also be achieved by electronic voting as computers have the capacity to record, to analyze, and to report the outcome of an election involving many millions of voters in a matter of minutes, if not seconds. One of the benefits to online voting is larger voter turnouts. The major reason why eligible voters don't turn out is due to schedule conflicts, difficulty in taking time off work, long lines and the hassle of driving to the polls. E-voting eliminates all of these hassles, allowing people to vote whenever it's most convenient and from the comfort of their own homes. (Ne Oo and Aung, 2014). There are many other benefits to electronic voting, like it being easier and more accessible to the disabled with the touch screens. The touch screens provide disabled people with hearing imparities, blindness and other disabilities the ability to cast their votes without the assistance of someone else or having to tell someone whom they wish to vote for. Another pro to electronic voting is its simplicity. For current elections, just the voting process alone it costs taxpayers worldwide hundreds of millions of dollars. E-voting eliminates the need for voting staff, thus saving taxpayers a great deal of money. Furthermore, the electoral process online would eliminate the potential of double counting, miscounting and lost votes. Ultimately, this will speed up the electoral process by making it more efficient. Not to mention, e-voting is more environmentally friendly because it eliminates the overwhelming amount of paper waste. The storage of the votes in an electronic voting system like is also much more feasible than paper ballots. These votes are typically stored on smart cards, which make them more portable and easier to count especially if a recount is needed.

### **Criticisms of Electronic Voting**

Electronic voting has disadvantage of risk of large scale and undetected fraud. Security is also one of the most important challenges in electronic voting. While Internet voting might appear convenient and easy, issues concerning security are a major concern. An abundance of computer viruses and unpredictable malfunctions make it difficult to ensure that every computer voted on is safe and protected. Computer issues aside, securing where the voting takes place online, in and of itself, presents a major challenge. Currently, hundreds of attack programs and viruses exist that when used could easily corrupt the online voting network. Since it's so difficult to ensure security, perhaps online voting security issues are simply too risky. Electronic voting has less transparency in tallying than paper voting. There are major social issues that people have the right to be concerned about when it comes to online voting. First, people have developed confidence in the current system of voting because it's visible. People know what to expect because the system is easily understood. Online voting is a less visible method of voting and more difficult to understand. In addition, not all people have access to the Internet at their homes or are familiar with how to use it. People have made a great tradition of driving to the polls (Ne Oo and Aung, 2014).

### **Impact on Election Outcomes**

The use of electronic voting in elections remains a contentious issue. Some countries such as Netherlands and Germany have stopped using it after it was shown to be unreliable, while the Indian Election commission recommends it. The involvement of numerous stakeholders including companies that manufacture these machines as well as political parties that stand to gain from rigging complicates this further (Nwafor, 2016).

Lastly, 2015 general election marked a new era in the deployment of sophisticated Information Communication technologies in the history of Nigeria elections in addition to existing technologies. Improved Automated Fingerprints Identification System (AFIS) was introduced to identify similar fingerprints on the register used for 2011 election. Business rule was also applied in addition to further clean the register. The business rule required that at least two fingers must be captured for a voter to be included in the register. For the first time, INEC adopted technology for accreditation of voters with the

aid of INEC Voters Identification System (IVAS) popularly called the Smart Card Reader (SCR). Temporary Voters' Cards (TVCs) which were issued to voters for 2011 election were replaced with the Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs). The PVC replaced the Temporary Voter Card (TVC) According to INEC, quality, security; durability and cost effectiveness were underlying factors in the production of the Permanent Voter Cards by INEC. These cards have many components and specialized features (e.g. base substrate, security printing, personalization, lamination and chip embedding), and it was designed with an average life span of ten (10) years (Agbo, 2016). With the SCRs, accreditation process was broken down into three: Identification, Verification and Authentication. Identification, physical comparison of the face of the card holder with the image displayed on the SCR when the PVC is read; Verification (that the card is original)- being able to read the information on the chip of the PVC presented; Authentication-comparison of the fingerprint stored on the card with what was physically presented and scanned by the reader. Once PVC has been read and accredited by the SCR, the Voter Identification Number (VIN) is stored in the reader and it does not allow the accreditation of that VIN on that particular reader any longer (Nwafor, 2016).

The card reader was designed to authenticate and verify on election day, Permanent Voters Card (PVC) issued by INEC. The device uses a cryptographic technology that has ultra-low power consumption, with a single core frequency of 1.2 GHz and an Android 4.2.2 Operating System (INEC, 2015). This implies that INEC card reader was designed to read information contained in the embedded chip of the permanent voters card issued by INEC to verify the authenticity of the PVC issued by INEC to verify the authenticity of the PVCs and also to carry out a verification of the intending voter by matching the biometrics obtained from the voter on the spot with the ones stored on the PVC (Engineering Network Team, 2015). The Engineering Network Team averred that, the ability of the card reader to perform the above described functions, as well as keeping a tally of the total numbers of voters accredited at the polling unit and transmitted to a central database server over a Global System for Mobile network, makes the card reader very useful in validating the authenticity of voters as against the previous syndrome of fake voters. (Engineering Network Team, 2015 in Ogwuche, 2019).

Obviously, the major reason for the deployment of this technologically based device in the penultimate general election in Nigeria by INEC, was the objective to prevent electoral fraud, to allow the electorate's vote to really count, reduce litigations arising from elections, authenticate and verify voters, protect the integrity and credibility of the elections, audit results from polling units across the federation and ensure transparency and accountability. Others are to do a range of statistical analysis of the demographics of voting for the purposes of research and planning, to build public confidence and trust in the election, reduce electoral conflicts, ensure a free and fair election and to further deepen Nigeria's electoral and democratic process (Electoral Institute, 2015).

The challenges that confronted the operation of some of the card readers during the 2015 election, general elections, a significant impact of the device usage was observed in the course of the elections. First, the use of the card reader led to the increase and reinforcement of public confidence and trust in the electoral process. This public confidence according to Vanguard (2015), is dependent on the integrity of an election which the 2015 general election appears to possess. Not a few Nigerians believed after the elections that their votes counted and as such, their will could be respected in future elections. This has reinforced the legitimacy of Nigerians in the democratic process. Again, electoral fraud was reduced, inflation of the number of voters present and multiple voting at polling station was reduced. This device in no small measure checked manipulation of figures.

Lastly, election litigations were minimized, there was a departure from the past where every election outcome was contested at the election tribunal. Majority of the candidates that lost in the 2015 general elections accepted the outcome of the elections and congratulated their opponents.. Additionally, electoral conflicts and violence was reduced to the barest minimum as the election was viewed as transparent and credible due to the deployment of card readers. According to the Electoral Institute (2015), due to the minimal level of electoral fraud due to the use of card reader, tensions were reduced among politicians and their supporters and as such, electoral conflict and violence were grossly diminished in the 2015 general elections compared to past elections in Nigeria. Commenting on the 2015 general elections, Ogwuche (2019) said, "Nigeria's democratic capacity has increased and its democratic institutions strengthened. Nigeria's democratic institutions have been able to incrementally develop a capacity for organizing free and fair elections, a useful step in deepening the democratic process".

#### **Audit Trails**

A fundamental challenge with any Voting machines is to produce evidence that the votes were recorded as cast and tabulated as recorded. Election results produced by voting systems that rely on voter-marked paper ballots can be verified with manual hand counts (either valid sampling or full recounts). Paperless ballot voting systems must support auditability in different ways. An independently auditable system,

sometimes called an Independent Verification, can be used in recounts or audits. These systems can include the ability for voters to verify how their votes were cast or enable officials to verify that votes were tabulated correctly.

It was the absence of this that eroded the credibility of the 2019 General elections. While the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) purchased and installed Server, where all the results from the various polling booths across the nation were being recorded, no recourse was made to the server to verify the results that came in manually from various polling booths across the nation, making a nonsense of the automation of the voting process. The argument of the electoral umpire was that electronic voting and counting was not provided for in the existing electoral act which President Muhammadu Buhari refused to sign into law after it was approved by both chambers of the National Assembly.

### **Conclusion**

A golden opportunity to get election administration in this country right with the adoption of ICT in our election processes presented itself but lack of political will on the part of the present administration made us and most unfortunately too, to remain where we were before the 2015 general elections. This COVID-19 is an opportunity for Nigeria to get it right this time. It has questioned our way of doing things, our electoral system and process inclusive. Now, it's not all about how credible, free and fair an election process is but equally how safe? The old process where voters queue on the line for hours trying to be accredited is no longer safe, given the new protocol by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), who all preaches social distancing and not staying in a crowd of more than twenty people for long to reduce the risk of infection, it's now imperative that our traditional election process will no longer suffice. We need to embrace e-voting to reduce the time individuals will stay at the polling booth trying to be accredited before voting, thereby reducing the possibility of community or mass infection while carrying out a constitutional right and a civic duty, as nothing could be equated with the health of the citizens.

Again, it will lend credibility to the electoral process as the incidence of shooting and killing in order to snatch ballot boxes will be eliminated. Most importantly, it will make citizens' votes to count and deepening the democratic process in the country, thereby enthroning good governance in all strata of governance at the national and sub-national levels.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the conclusion above, the researchers hereby proffer some recommendations that will improve the imperativeness of e-voting in post COVID-19 Nigeria in order to guarantee the credibility of the electoral process and most importantly, safeguard the citizens performing their constitutional rights and civic responsibilities from a killer disease with no proven cure at the moment.

1. There should be a political will on the part of this present administration to safeguard guard citizens health wise and make their votes count in future elections. This could be done by adopting e-voting and counting, thereby reducing the period one will have to queue while waiting to cast votes as was the case in the past. Limiting exposure and body contacts which e-voting guarantees will go a long way in achieving this goal.
2. The President should as a matter of urgency sign the 2018 Electoral Bill into law by assenting to the bill which had been presented to him on four different occasions. Incidentally, the National Assembly is working on another Electoral Bill which has e-voting and counting as one of its components. The President should as a matter of patriotic act this time round, assent to the bill and make it a law.
3. The Independent National Electoral Commission should adopt full electronic voting in the electoral process from registration to announcement of the election results. This present practice of registering voters electronically should also be extended to casting of votes and even counting of votes to make it full blown electronic voting. Servers should be provided where every votes casted will be recorded and could be retrieved at will.
4. The nation should have a national population data base and an electronic national ID Card. This will check over voting and voting by proxy, thereby reducing the incident of electoral malpractice to a very large extent.



5. INEC should maintain an accessible server and online website where results will be displayed real time during and after the elections. This will reduce falsification and manipulation of election results thereby undermining the will of the people and the electoral process.

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