



ABSTRACT

There is a growing reduction in voter participation and citizen involvement in electoral system in Nigeria. Scholars and political analysts have advanced reasons for low turnout in Nigerian elections; for some, electoral fraud, malpractice and lack of electoral integrity seemed to discourage electorates in voting while others maintained that national electoral management body is incapacitated to uphold the virtue of electoral integrity. However, the constitutional role of INEC is not yet examined to juxtapose its relevance in this direction, therefore this paper unveiled the contextual role of INEC in ensuring

PROTECT ELECTORAL INTEGRITY AND ENHANCE VOTER PARTICIPATION: CONTEXTUAL ROLE FOR INEC

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Introduction

There is a growing fear among electorates about rising cases of electoral fraud exhibited by frontline politicians in recent elections conducted in Ekiti and Osun as being characterized by vote buying, thereby raising silent points concerning electoral integrity and voter participation. In fact, there are agitations from different quarters about tendency by some unscrupulous elements to have hacked or manipulated new voters register as well as plans to manipulate the 2023 electoral register ahead of the polls (See Akinduro, 2022). In other words, there seems to be a weak electoral process that paves ways for electoral frauds, vote buying, ringing among other electoral malpractices. Perhaps Adetula (2008) was right to have described INEC as unhealthy electoral body and the major problem of Nigeria's democracy. Hence, electoral integrity is a serious issue ravaging Nigeria's elections; and it is the bane of distrust between electorates and elected officers.

Again, the integrity of elections around the world has been a major concern of national and international organizations to the extent that a colossal amount of money has been spent on the improvement of electoral integrity. For instance, Ebirim (2013) reported that the European instrument for democracy and Human Rights spent approximately EUR 307 million on over 700 projects relating to democracy between 2007 and 2010. Little wonder, Norris (2013) affirmed that understanding the integrity of electoral process is a vital precursor for understanding any other aspect of electoral politics. This explains why developing countries have been one time or the other confronted with various political, socio and economic challenges partly because the results of their elections were



electoral integrity and promoting voter participation in Nigerian elections. The paper conceived electoral integrity in terms of legal and international framework practices for free and fair election. Having identified numerous constitutional roles of INEC in maintaining electoral integrity and enhancing voter participation, the paper argued that electoral integrity plays a pivotal role in building public trust in electoral institutions, processes and determining the level of electorate involvement in an election. It was therefore concluded that the integrity of Nigerian election rests largely on INEC through transparency, use of rule of law, and strong capacity affinity with other stakeholders.

Keywords: Electoral integrity, voter participation, INEC, civil society organization, electorates.

questionable and unacceptable due to electoral integrity. In this wise, Toby (2014) averred that many elections around the globe are conducted with a high standard whereas there is evidence of poorly conducted elections in developing countries most especially in African countries.

In support of this, Oyakhire (2018) observed that every successive election conducted by INEC after 1999 suffered loss of integrity. Stressing that two major national elections conducted in 2003 and 2007 produced the most controversial, highly discredited, notoriously unreliable and widely cancelled results in Nigeria's electoral history. In fact, the 2011 national election was reported not to have witnessed a major radical departure from the floppy parody of the past (Okahide, 2012). For this author, each election was most often seriously marred by INEC's poor organization, widespread procedural irregularities, lack of essential transparency, significant evidence of fraud during the collation of results, disenfranchisement of voters at different stages, lack of equal conditions for contestants and numerous incidents of violence. Obviously, violence hampers on the integrity of an election because it undermines constituted authority and its legitimacy.

The assertion above shows that elections did not live up to the hopes and expectations of most Nigerians owing to lack of electoral integrity. For Oyakhire (2018), a credible electoral body is an inevitable fundamental requirement for genuine democracy, competent leadership, sustainable development, growth and international respectability. Simply put, electoral integrity ensures free, fair, peaceful and transparent election. In fact, electoral integrity is the basis for a well-articulated modality of vigorous publicity, creative and dependable leadership, incisive enlightenment, mass mobilization, adequate logistics and strong financial support for INEC as well as an impressive and ubiquitous security arrangement. In essence, electoral integrity is associated with credible elections whose results are largely and truly acceptable to Nigerians with minimal or without post electoral litigations.

Evidently, the issue of electoral integrity has been a major concern for Nigerians and indeed the rationale for voter apathy. Momotal (2017) reported that between 1959 and 2015, most elections conducted by the various election management bodies were marred by irregularities and allegations of violence. Similarly, Abubakar (2014) concurred that the election years of 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 could be described as poor, bar, worse and worst in the history of election administration in Nigeria. Stressing that 2015 general election witnessed the highest level of



election petition against the Electoral Management Body (EMB) in the country (1,475). The situation that leads to decline in voter participation and discourages many electorates during election.

Simply put, voter turnout has been on a steady decline since the 2003 election. Little wonder, Aliyu (2016) reported a 69% presidential election voter turnout in 2003 while the last general elections in 2019 recorded a meager of 34.7% voter turnout despite the increasing registered voters in the country. Several political analysts and commentators have highlighted voter participation as a major dearth of electoral outcomes where just about 10% of the entire population votes in public officers at the national stage. Therefore, there is every need to examine and evaluate the statutory role of INEC towards ensuring electoral integrity and by extension promoting voter participation in an election. Since the 2023 is by the corner, and Nigerians are yearning for credible election so as to elect another set of leaders into various offices, hence, this paper calls on INEC for protective role in order to ensure electoral integrity with view a to increasing voter participation.

Conceptual Clarifications:

For the purpose of this discourse, the following concepts are comprehensively discussed; electoral system and process, electoral integrity, voter participation, INEC and its essential role towards electoral integrity and enhancement of voters' participation.

Electoral System and Process

It is a well-known fact that electoral system serves as a guideline to the democratic outlook of the nation. As a matter of fact, electoral system determines the existing democratic system, its nature and its acceptance by the stakeholders in the electoral process. For Obah (2013), electoral system refers to a complex of rules and regulations that govern the selection of officeholders in a democratic context. For this author, the choice of a particular electoral system does not only have a profound effect on the political life of a country but also influences costs and benefits to political actors- political parties and candidates. In his view, Jibrin (2014) maintained that most controversy about electoral systems hinged on rules for converting votes into seats. Such rules are as important as they are technical. They form the inner workings of democracy, sometimes as little understood by ordinary voters as the engine of a car but just as essential to the political machine.

Invariably, electoral systems make provision for the way and means through which peoples' representatives are to be elected or chosen. This lends credence to the fact that elections are a complex set of activities with different variables that act and feed on one another. In support of this, Nnoli (2013) argued that an electoral system encompasses procedures, rules and regulations for the electorate to exercise their right to vote and determine how elected officers occupy the allocated seats. In this sense, the procedures, rules and regulations governing elections are jointly defined by both national constitutions and specific electoral laws. For this author, the administrative obligations and management of elections are the responsibility of specific public institutions tasked for that, either as government departments (as in Swaziland) or as independent electoral commissions (as in Nigeria) (Nnoli, 2013).



However, scholars like Reynold (2013) argued that at the most basic level; electoral systems translate the votes cast in a general election into seats won by parties and candidates in the elective offices. The scholar further identifies the key elements of an electoral system to include: (i) the electoral formula (plurality/majority, proportional, mixed, or other); (ii) the ballot structure (i.e. whether the voter votes for a candidate or a party and whether the voter makes a single choice or expresses a series of preferences); and (iii) the zone magnitude (the number of representatives to the legislature that a particular state, zone or senatorial district elects). This explains the position of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2013) that electoral systems define and structure the rules of the political game; help determine who is elected, how a campaign is funded, the role of political parties, and most importantly who governs.

To this end, it must be reiterated that the choice of an electoral system may help to engineer specific outcomes such as to encourage cooperation and accommodation in a divided society. This shows that the importance of a suitable electoral system in a developing country like Nigeria with diverse ethnic base cannot be underestimated. In one hand, it underscores the role of electoral system as essential part of political institution in representative democracies- in doing this, it converts votes into seats and structure the choices facing voters. On the other hand, it unravels the behaviour of political parties, and their candidates. Obviously, a country's electoral system is the technique used to measure the number of elected position in government that persons and political parties are awarded after elections. Simply put, it is the way that votes are translated into seats in parliament or in other areas of government (such as the governor or and presidency).

On the contrary, electoral process determines the organization and conduct of elections to elective/public (political) offices by an electoral body (Iwara, 2012). That is, election administration remains essential part of the electoral structure and process. By structure, it defines the bureaucracy that is set up or established to organize and conduct elections- the Independent National Electoral Commission INEC is a good example. By process, it reveals the rules, procedures and activities relating among others, the establishment of electoral bodies, the appointment of their members, the registration of voters, the nomination of candidates, balloting, counting of the ballots, declaration of results, the selection and training of electoral officials, constituency delimitation, voters education and, in some cases registration of political parties and supervision of party nomination congresses. In addition, Beckett (2013) argued that there are other critical issues in electoral process including but not limited to election organization, administration and management, funding of the Electoral Management Body (EMB), logistics, the pervasive role of the state, tenure of office and autonomy of the EMB, among others.

However, it is quite worrisome to note that the issues of electoral process have not been accorded the right of place vis-à-vis the issues surrounding the electoral system especially in developing countries including Nigeria. Indeed, there is less interest in electoral process as observed in the literatures and electoral documentation. For instance, Jide (2013) recognized different types of electoral processes practices by different countries based on their electoral environmental factors and internal peculiarities. Stressing further that electoral process employed and practiced in Nigeria has some implications and impacts on the success or failure of their electoral system. This is more so given the available of issues highlighted above surrounding electoral system and process in Nigeria while the situation on electoral system and process are associated with EMB.



Hence, electoral integrity and enhancement of voter participation are solely vested on Independent National Electoral Commission.

Electoral Integrity

There are differing views on what constitutes electoral integrity. For some scholars, it is the observance of international conventions and global norms as it relates to electoral cycle including pre-election period, polling day activities and post-election activities (Norris, 2013). In fact, international norms include fundamental freedoms, democracy promotion and human rights without which elections cannot be classified as free and fair (See Sunday, 2015). In other words, electoral integrity gives room for peoples' inclusion of equal opportunities in political participation-including those that are qualified to vote during election. In this sense, a pragmatic electoral integrity should ensure the adherence to the rule of law, guaranteeing fair, transparent and equitable election administration, which provides an effective aggregation of the vote. For Schaffer (2018), these variables and others are germane to electoral integrity in every democratic system.

The assertion above shows that when an election lacks aforementioned ingredients, it could be said not to possess integrity, which are commonly conceived as flawed elections, manipulated elections or electoral malpractices or electoral fraud (Electoral Integrity Proposal, 2012; Van Ham, 2012). That is, electoral integrity gives room for level playing field, which is also known as an ideal electoral process. In his dictum, Birch suggests that all activities that lead to a violation of the level playing field constitute elections that lack the character of electoral integrity (Birch, 2017). Whereas well-run contests that can be described as credible, acceptable, genuine, or the standard rhetoric of free and fair are considered as elections having integrity (EIP, 2012). For Alemika (2017), electoral integrity is the degree of the freeness and fairness of elections, which are surrounded by several factors including but not limited to legal framework; electoral system; technical efficiency of electoral management authority; relative autonomy of the electoral agency from interference by other organs of government and the ruling party; as well as degree to which electoral processes, decisions, participation and outcomes are protected against manipulation, corruption and violence.

However, some scholars have viewed electoral integrity from legalistic perspective. For instance, Minnite (2017) and Nwabueze (2018) averred that integrity of an election is determined within the context of the existing electoral laws in a particular state. In line with the position of Lehoucq on electoral fraud, that an act is fraudulent if it breaks the law; the legal perspective suggests that the integrity of an election can be determined by examining the existing electoral laws of the state. As convincing as this might sound, it does not offer generalizable view because states possess different legal systems. In this sense, Minnite (2017) maintained that there is no single accepted legal definition of voter fraud (a sub-category of electoral fraud). For Birch (2019), domestic laws are sometimes corrupt themselves given their contradiction with international legal obligations as well as the state's constitution. Therefore, legalistic view of electoral integrity does not hold water and totally unattainable.

In the same vein, another set of scholars have subscribed to sociological or cultural perspective of electoral integrity which is considered on the basis of general perceptions about violation of the



electoral norms of the society. For instance, McDonald (2012) contends that cultural relativity should be central to the understanding of fraudulent and non-fraudulent electoral practices in different political societies. For this author, what is an acceptable or fraudulent practice in one culture need not be so considered in another, especially when environmental, political, and participatory practices vary so widely. Obviously, this perception suffers the difficulty of arriving at a meaningful consensus on what constitutes electoral integrity or otherwise even within a society as norms (which are usually latent) rather than laws are emphasized (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2014). Again, some researchers and scholars believe that electoral integrity is an agreed-upon norm on the best practice of elections by the international community (Boda, 2015). This approach aligns with various international declarations on the rights of citizens as they relate to elections following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In fact, the framework of the International Parliamentary Union's Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections has been most useful in this direction- it emphasizes the principles of free and fair elections, voting and electorates right, candidature and party rights, and the responsibilities of states towards their achievement (Inter Parliamentary Union, 2016). While this approach tends to be practical especially for international observation work, it is argued that this framework is potentially constrained by increasing claims that the so-called best practice are governed by the standards of the dominant powers, encouraging the usage of their own state elections as the criteria for others (Brich, 2019). Lastly, other scholars and researchers construed electoral integrity from the models of democratic theory. For instance, scholars like Schedler (2012) predicated their views on the assumptions that elections must offer an effective choice of political authorities among a community of free and equal citizens. This position is criticized on the basis that there are multiple models of democracy; as such understanding of electoral fraud will be certainly driven by the particular model adopted (Katz, 2015). In fact, the democratic theory approach is less practical given that the explanation is more in the realms of theory.

However, for the purpose of this discourse, the combination of legal (domestic) and international norms approaches appear more applicable and practicable to determine the integrity of elections. This is based on the rationale that domestic laws that govern elections in states are usually designed according to the generally agreed framework for free and fair elections in the international system. This is especially so since Nigeria is one of the countries that subscribe to the international frameworks for elections and democracy. For instance, Nigeria is signatory to many international organizations such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Commonwealth, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the African Union (AU).

Voter Participation

There is no doubt that voter participation or political participation is one the issues that attracted attention of scholars and researchers in politics in recent times, yet it remains an essentially contested concept with a variety of views on parade. To start with, Pateman (2014) construed voter participation as behaviour designed to affect the choice of governmental personnel and or policies. Whereas Kaase and Marsh (2012) conceived voter participation as all voluntary activities by individual citizens intended to influence either directly or indirectly political choices at various levels of the political system. For Nelson (2014), voter participation is an action of private citizens



intended to influence the actions or the composition of national or local government. Similarly, Booth and Seligson (2018) viewed voter participation as behaviour that is influencing or attempting to influence the distribution of public goods- including security of lives and property and infrastructural and social amenities such as roads, schools, health centres and other services provided by the government. From these views, Conge (2018) categorized conceptions of voter participation as:

- Active and passive participation: Voter participation can be reckoned with only in terms of action- voting, campaigning for a political party- that is a feeling of patriotism and awareness of political issues while passive means non-involvement in all political activities.
- Aggressive and non-aggressive behaviours: Voter participation embraces civil disobedience and political violence while non-aggressive behaviour depicts political conventional activities.
- Structural and non-structural objects: Voter participation shows citizens efforts to change the form of government policies and or decisions while non-structural reveals maintenance and continuity of government policies or decisions.
- Governmental and non-governmental aims: Voter participation is linked to behaviour directed towards government authorities, policies and institutions while non-governmental aim depicts phenomena outside the realm of government.
- Mobilized and voluntary actions: Voter participation could be behaviour sponsored and guided by the government to enhance its welfare while citizens could as well initiate behaviour geared towards pursuance of their interests.
- Intended and unintended outcomes: Voter participation is a concerted effort of citizens for consequence of a government while citizens might keep aloof from a government by not showing intended outcome.

These are salient but contentious issues that cannot be disregarded when dissecting voter participation. Therefore, voter participation may express individual or collective action at the national or local level that supports or opposes state structures, authorities or decisions regarding allocation of public goods... the action can be verbal or written... violent or non-violent... could be of any intensity (Conge, 2018). Obviously, voter participation is a mechanism through which the public expresses their preferences in relation to public affairs. In essence, political participation is the basic and salient activity through which allocation of public goods can be influenced. It is in this connection that voting in an election is considered to be the most important form of political participation.

However, Blais (2018) observed that voter turnout has been identified in the extant literature as one of the core ways of measuring the level of participation in any election. Voter turnout is usually determined through the percentage of registered voters who vote in an election. The presumption is that the higher the level of voter turnout, the higher the level of participation and, by extension the greater the democratic quality of the election (Altman, 2012; Lindberg, 2014). For Bratton (2015), voter registration was revealed as the single most important determinant not only of a citizen's behaviour but also of overall participation, outweighing any other institutional, cultural or social consideration. Hence, voter participation is a key ingredient in a democratic system to the



extent that the functionality of such system is applauded on the basis of political participation. In this sense, declining voter participation is a reflection of poor democratic system whereby electorates voting power is weak.

In fact, scholars have advanced different reasons for low voter participation. For some, lack of electoral integrity is the main reason (Ladner, 2016); in the sense that, if voters feel their vote may not produce the desired outcome, they may opt not to vote. That is, in an election where people queue for hours to vote candidate of their choice but where predetermined candidate is declared winner- voters' mandate has been thrown into wind. Therefore, their commitment and involvement in future election is in dearth. In contrary to this view, Freitag (2014) argued that proportional representation results in a higher voter turnout than electoral systems like the simple plurality model. In support of this, Milner (2016) in his comprehensive study of turnout in Swiss municipal elections, found a positive relationship between proportional representation elections and voter turnout.

Moreover, Kuenzi and Lambricht (2017) reported electoral formula as a significant factor influencing voter turnout in Africa elections. Whereas Freitag (2014) maintained that cultural factors were more important than institutional factors in some elections around the world, which he himself admitted might not be the case in every election. For some scholars, institutional factor such as the nature of electoral reform is an influential factor affecting voter turnout (See Omotola, 2015). The argument here is that electoral reform that promotes voter confidence in electoral institutions, processes and outcomes can engender a high level of turnout, and vice versa. Simply put, the turnout may be higher if political parties and candidates are able to take advantage of electoral reforms for effective mobilization. If not, the reforms may have only a marginal effect on turnout (Stein & Owens, 2012). For Gimpel (2013), the geographical and spatial factor hamper on voting behaviour in developing nations. Stressing that if voting centres are close and easily accessible, there is the likelihood of higher voter turnout, and vice versa.

In spite of these aforementioned factors, Gray (2015) identified electoral integrity and level of public trust in electoral institutions as major plight casting doubt on the usefulness of a vote in terms of its power to determine an electoral outcome. Besides, the relative weakness and fragmentation that characterize opposition parties, as well as troubling issues of electoral violence and corruption, have also been considered as contributory factors to declining levels of voter participation (Omotola, 2015). Hence, low voter participation in Nigeria's election is not unconnected with incessant electoral fraud and malpractice that characterize her elections (see table below).

Table 1: Showing Voters' Participation in Nigerian Election From 1959 – 2019

Year	Population	Voting Age Population	Registered Voters	Total Votes
1959	34,443,000	16,532,640	9,036,083	7,185,555
1979	77,841,000	48,499,083	38,142,090	17,098,267
1983	89,022,000	65,300,000	43,620,780	25,400,000
1993	105,264,000	58,745,645	50,526,720	14,039,486
1999	108,258,359	57,938,945	52,792,781	30,280,052
2003	129,934,911	64,319,246	60,823,022	42,018,735



2007	131,859,731	71,004,507	61,567,036	35,397,517
2011	155,215,573	81,691,751	73,528,040	39,469,484
2015	177,155,754	87,784,373	67,422,005	29,432,083
2019	196,752,840	96,515,227	84,004,084	28,614,190

Source: BUDGIT (2019); Election Factbook: What's at Stake? Election Voter Guide (2019)

Independent National Electoral Commission- INEC

It is a well known fact that every nation has a way of managing their elections either by a designated body or constituted authority who oversees electoral affairs in the state. In Nigeria, for instance, an Electoral Commission of the Federation (ECF) was established to conduct the 1964 and 1965 federal and regional elections; the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) conducted the transitional elections in 1979 and the controversial elections of 1983. Also, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) conducted the annulled 1993 general elections while the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) took the centre stage in Nigerian electoral programmes; and lastly the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Of all these election management bodies, Olubusoye, Idris, Bamiduro, Adepoju, Sani, Alaba, Folorunsho, Akintade and Ogundunmade (2020) reported that INEC remains most relevant body for conducting six general elections: the 1999 transition elections; the historic 2003 elections; the critical 2007 elections; the 2011 remarkable elections; and the 2015 civilian-to-civilian transitional elections as well as the 2019 general elections.

In essence, elections in Nigeria are currently regulated by the 1999 constitution (as amended) and the Electoral Act of 2022 (as amended). The constitution is explicit about the scope, powers and responsibilities of INEC. In addition, the electoral act provides further detail on the commission's powers and guidelines for registering voters, procedures for the conduct of elections, the registration and regulation of political parties, electoral offences and the determination of electoral offences (Hassan, 2015). Little wonder, Chidi (2015) argued that INEC is expected to serve as an independent and effective EMB committed to the conduct of free, fair and credible elections for sustainable democracy in Nigeria. This collaborate the INEC's vision, which is to be one of the best Election Management Bodies in the world that meets the aspirations of the Nigerian people (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2015). As enshrined in the 1999 Constitution (as amended) and Section 2 of the Electoral Act 2022 (as amended), the functions of INEC include the following:

1. Organize, undertake and supervise all elections to the offices of the President and Vice-President, the Governor and Deputy Governor of a State, and to the membership of the Senate, the House of Representatives and the House of Assembly of each state of the federation;
2. Register political parties in accordance with the provisions of the constitution and Act of the National Assembly;
3. Monitor the organization and operation of the political parties, including their finances, conventions, congresses and party primaries.
4. Arrange for the annual examination and auditing of the funds and accounts of political parties, and publish a report on such examination and audit for public information;



5. Arrange and conduct the registration of persons qualified to vote and prepare, maintain and revise the register of voters for the purpose of any election under this constitution;
6. Monitor political campaigns and provide rules and regulations which shall govern the political parties;
7. Conduct voter and civic education;
8. Promote knowledge of sound democratic election processes; and
9. Conduct any referendum required to be conducted pursuant to the provision of the 1999 Constitution or any other law or Act of the National Assembly.

Accordingly, INEC shall be guided by the following values in the performance of its duties:-

1. **Autonomy:** INEC shall carry out all its functions independently, free from external control and influence.
2. **Transparency:** INEC shall display openness and transparency in all its activities and in its relationship with all stakeholders.
3. **Integrity:** INEC shall maintain truthfulness and honesty in all its dealings at all times.
4. **Credibility:** INEC shall ensure that no action or activity is taken in support of any candidate or political party.
5. **Impartiality:** INEC shall ensure the creation of a level playing field for all political actors.
6. **Dedication:** INEC shall be committed to providing quality electoral services efficiently and effectively, guided by best international practice and standards.
7. **Equity:** INEC shall ensure fairness and justice in dealing with all stakeholders.
8. **Excellence:** INEC shall be committed to the promotion of merit and professionalism as the basis for all its actions.
9. **Team Work:** INEC shall create a conducive environment that promotes teamwork among its staff at all levels.

Electoral Integrity and Enhancement of Voter Participation: INEC Statutory Role

Based on the constitutional role bestowed on INEC, it is expected that integrity of our elections must be ensured by INEC. In fact, the significant role of INEC to the promotion of civic and voter education as well as sensitization of the citizens and political actors cannot be under estimated. Simply put, INEC has the statutory role of conducting free, fair and credible election, and ensuring voter participation at all times. However, Austin (2017) averred that the quality of participation of citizens is dependent on how much knowledge they have on the organization of election activities. In line with the 2010 amended Electoral Act and the 1999 Constitution (as amended), Johnson (2014) maintained that INEC is responsible and has the statutory power to conduct voter and civic education activities. Perhaps this explains why INEC (2018) in the lead-up to the 2019 general elections outlined a series of activities in its strategic plan to address voter and civic education on a more sustained, long-term and collaborative basis. Accordingly, the Commission instituted a pilot Integrated Voter Education Programme in both secondary schools and tertiary institutions across the country to enlighten students about the electoral process and encourage them to organize voter education activities within their schools or campuses.



In fact, Agbaje and Adejumobi (2018) reported that as part of the Commission's effort to address low level of awareness of citizens on electoral matters, INEC inaugurated a 15-member National Inter-agency Advisory Committee in Voter Education and Publicity. The membership of this committee includes the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC); National Orientation Agency; Federal Ministry of Information; Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development; Federal Ministry of Communication; Federal Ministry of Education; National Broadcasting Commission; Nigerian Communication Commission; Nigerian Television Authority; Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria; News Agency of Nigeria; Nigerian Guild of Editors; Nigerian Labour Congress; Nigerian Union of Journalists; and Federal Ministry of Youth Development who are expected to review the existing framework and advise the Commission on areas of improvement; suggest effective strategies for public enlightenment and voter education; identify various organizations and agencies capable of undertaking voter education activities and recommend appropriate support for them.

Evidently, the Commission is working round the clock to improve on voter participation by collaborating with relevant agencies such as News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), political parties and other relevant stakeholders in voter education programmes. Perhaps Olawale (2018) was right to have reported that political parties are expected to carry out an effective political mobilization campaign and good enlightenment programmes that will enhance voter involvement at the polls. To this end, INEC usually partners with major stakeholders including civil society organizations (CSOs), especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with support from donor agencies to educate Nigerians on the procedures and guidelines for elections; their rights with regard to the current electoral laws; strategies for protecting their mandate; and reduction of electoral violence on election day. For Austin (2019), organizations such as Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA), Youth Advocacy for Constitutional and Electoral Reform (YACORE), Partners for Electoral Reform (PER), Policy and Legislative Advocacy Centre (PLAC) among others collaborate with INEC for improvement on voter participation in elections.

Little wonder, Olawale (2018) averred that electoral integrity and voter participation are enhanced by ensuring that everyone with a legal right to vote is able to do so; protecting critical election infrastructure such as storage facilities, polling places, and centralized vote tabulation locations; and safeguarding information and communication technology such as voter registration databases, voting machines, and other electoral management systems. In other words, issues surrounding electoral integrity and voter participation cuts across electoral system and management. Most importantly, INEC must ensure protection of critical electoral infrastructure from cyber and other attacks, identify needed electoral reforms and innovative mechanisms to engage the public, promote effective practices in state voting laws and practices, promote public confidence in election systems and results, ensure fair access to the ballot box, educate and train the election workforce on importance of integrity in the process of conduct of election; address the intergovernmental and political party issues and tensions inherent in electoral management system.

Suggestions for Way Forward

The rates of voter turnout during the Ekiti and Osun elections showed that INEC ought to do every necessary thing to ensure improved voter participation in the 2023 general elections. Based on the recent experiences at polls, the following suggestions are made:-



Firstly, electoral integrity is germane to the level of electorate engagements, since many feel that INEC is not doing enough to curb electoral malpractice- hence voter apathy. However, there is every need to safeguard electoral process and enhance voter participation by building on the amended electoral acts of 2022, thereby improving the level of public trust in electoral institutions and processes.

Also, incumbent government should make policy that will compel voting age groups to participate in an election. For instance, voting could be tied to some benefits enjoyed by citizens so as to build voting culture and encourage voter participation of citizenry.

Moreover, it is important for INEC and relevant stakeholders to intensify political education and mobilization of electorates. In fact, Political parties and civil society organizations should take advantage of the amended electoral acts 2022 to facilitate a voter-friendly environment. Obviously, these bodies together with INEC should continually make sustainable process of political education and mobilization of the populace.

Lastly, considering the significant role of social media in the people's life, it is important to consolidate the benefits by promoting an enabling environment for the expansion of their applicability. The most recent example is the pre-online registration launched by INEC during the continuous electoral registration exercise. Other technological based innovations should be incorporated into the system for better performance.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it could be emphasized that electoral integrity is very crucial to increased voter participation. Though the integrity of our election rests largely on electoral management body, which is expected to be transparent, uphold the virtue of the rule of law, totally independent of the commission, build strong capacity affinity with other stakeholders so as to improve the integrity of election, and by extension attract many electorates to vote in an election.

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