



**TOWARD THE ROLES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN VOTER
EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Voter education is one of the cardinal principles of democratic politics and ensuring credible elections in any democratic society. The imperative of this cannot be underestimated in developing democracy like the Nigeria state. Since 1999, electoral processes in Nigeria were alleged to be full of irregularities ranges from violent electioneering campaigns, unwarranted voting behaviors of election rigging such as multiple voting, ballot snatching, vote-selling among others. These unruly behaviors are unarguably undermining the integrity of Nigeria's electoral process. Although, numerous political-legal measures were put in place by the country's electoral body the Independent National Electoral Commission' through the introduction of the card reader machine, massive disposition of civil securities at voting points as well as series of amendments to the electoral acts by Nigeria's' National Assembly members. However, despite the concerted measures to checkmate the unruly behavior of the voters, the trend continuous unabatedly. This article thus proposed that addressing Nigeria's electoral knots especially in respect to the voters' behavior requires the participation of civil society groups for informal voter education. It argued that ignorance of the electoral laws and nonsensical attitude toward the electoral outcomes by the vast majority promote the continuous engagement in these deviant behaviors. The article thus recommends that to overcome the perennial challenges of the electoral process, the Nigerian government should engage civil society and community-based organizations to educate voters on the dangers of electoral fraud in the country.

Keywords: *Civil Society; Voter Education; Electoral Process; INEC*

Introduction

Credible, free, fair election and an acceptable election is one of the cardinal principles of democracy in any political setup. While conducting the credible election is a norm for any democracy, however, due to their vulnerability factors, the imperative of free and fair election cannot be underestimated for developing democracies like Nigeria state. Although, conducting the acceptable election is a priority of the Nigeria government, however, since her political independence, the Nigeria electoral processes was marred with series of irregularities range from electoral frauds of vote selling and buying, ballot snatching, political thuggery, to advance fraud of manipulation of the result sheets. Other challenges are those of an excessive number of rejected votes. For instance, Ibeanu (2014) submitted that over one million votes cast in the Nigerian presidential election of April 2011 were rejected during counting. He attributed the problem mainly to wrong ballots paper making by ill inform voters. Pundits have noted that the number is rather high and could have been markedly lower if voters received adequate voter education. The consequences of the ill voter education in addition to the illicit voting patterns often manifest in voter apathy series post-election disputes orchestrated through prolong legal litigation to the worst incidences of violent uprising. Available records show except for the 2015 general election, there are no single presidential election outcomes that have not witnessed a legal battle between and among the contesting opponents.

However, even as the 2015 presidential election is not contested, other elections outcomes of the governorship and legislative election are not freed from the prolonged legal litigation. Experts have pointed out numerous factors responsible for the unfortunate incidences in Nigeria's electoral landscape. Okon (2013) attributed the incidence to the zero-sum approach of the political parties in the electioneering process. Mezieobi (2004) claimed that the electoral campaigns which are a crucial aspect of the electoral process in Nigeria is violent prone, rather than focus on party programs, they engaged in campaigns of calumny, hooliganism, arson, thuggery, and gangsterism. Others include political violence, the rigging of

election; activities that jeopardized the stable democratic practice at all levels of governments in Nigeria. Some analysts also accused the successive electoral bodies of the irregularities, unpreparedness, or at worst deliberately intended to sabotage the fair election in favor of a particular political party. Perhaps, experts have argued that stable democracy can only thrive when citizens can decide on the party or candidate they wish to vote for or support without any influence. They must also decide whether they will vote at all or not. Importantly, whereas the act of ensuring free, fair and credible election has been a focus of both the state legislatures and academics, disturbingly, most of the attention focused on the electoral bodies, little is discussed about the importance of voter education in ensuring free and fair election in the country.

Perhaps the few revolving ideas on voter education centered on the roles of social media in enlightening the voters. Perspective on the roles of civil society organizations in voter education toward promoting election credibility has not been tapped. This article aimed to address this vacuum. The thrust of the paper, therefore, is to analyse the potential roles of Civil Society and Community Base Organization in educating voters toward ensuring free and fair elections in Nigeria. In doing this, the article proceeds in four sections. The first section presented the significance of the study; the second section highlighted the methodology of the study, section three presented an overview of some selected literature, section four is the explanation on the roles of Civil Societies and Community base organizations in ensuring voter education in Nigeria. Whereas section five presented the conclusion and recommendation of the study.

Significance of the study

This study is important and indeed timely concerning the Nigerian political landscape. Adequate voter education is a prerequisite for sustaining democracy. In the light of this presupposition, well-informed citizenry participation and understanding of the civil rights influence good governance and accountability to the citizens by those who exercise power on their behalf. Scholarly pieces of evidence have shown that the values of voter education are delineated as follows: encouraging leadership discipline, control of political violence, exposure on the process of election,

peacebuilding, and maintenance of democratic order. Therefore, sustainable democracy can be actualized through voter education involving mass mobilization, values to shun violence, stemming corruption, and national consciousness sensitization. Adequate voter education should also have incredible roles in combating voter apathy. The overall effect thus enhances free, fair, and credible elections outcomes of which can garner national and international acceptance.

Methodology

This is a concept paper. Therefore, the empirical data sourced from secondary materials including but not limited to journal articles, textbooks, newspapers, and bulletins. The credibility of the information rested on their in-depth analysis, careful selection, scrutiny, and triangulation of the information from the diverse materials.

Literature Review

Conceptually, voter education simply refers to an act of providing citizens of democracy with basic information about participating in elections. It consists of registering for election, filling of ballot sheet, and voting for candidates of choice as well as accepting and appreciating election outcomes in the post-election period. Extant literature shows, greater than anything else, the greatest obstacle to the development of nascent democracy in society is ill- training of voters toward the civic right (Mezioebi and Priscilia, 2018). Reflecting on the imperative of voter education, Ogunna (2003) proposed that ineffective voting means that popular decisions of the masses are not made. Voter education is advocated to sensitize the Nigerian citizens on how to maintain political stability through rightful conduct in elections, political activities, and political participation. Indeed, there is a popular belief that the revolving spate of conflict, brutal attacks political opponents; gangsterism and thuggery are a product of ill-prepared voters education in the country. There is general agreement that effective voter education takes place to assist the election administration in its task of delivering a free, fair, efficient, and cost-effective election. Through effective voter education, the electorates are sensitized on the importance of participating in elections. Voter education

provides the background attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge that stimulate an efficient voter pattern an avenue that can consolidate democratic politics.

Importantly, authors have indicated that voter education can start at a different period in the electioneering process; however, the popular assertion is that an effective voter education campaigns start early and continue throughout the election process. Beginning the process early should enable voters to be acquainted with the registration procedures. It will also entice them the necessity for the prospective voters to check their names in their respective centers to confirm their entries are correct. Although, while the earlier starting is important, there is no limitation because it will at best continues even on Election Day. For instance, in countries emerging from conflict, civic education should begin with an explanations of the nature and importance of the peace agreement, the importance of national reconciliation and peacebuilding, and how fair election can contribute to this peacebuilding. The educators should also focus on the human rights of all citizens, especially their civil and political rights of all citizens. Voters should understand the importance of women's full participation in the political process. In post-conflict societies, voter education can highlight the importance of women's knowledge and expertise in the areas of reconstruction and national reconciliation, as well as the importance of their equal involvement in the political process.

ROLES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION IN VOTER EDUCATION

Since the first republic, the responsibilities of voter education and other civic functions are principally nested with the government. This is executed through the national electoral commissions chaired with the task of election management in the country. In Nigeria, Section 2 (a) and (b), as well as Section 154 of the Electoral Act 2010 established the power of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to conduct voter and civic education. However, informed with the imperative multi-sectoral approach to the voter election, other government agencies like the National Orientation Agency keyed into the civic enlightenment role. In this respect, several private media groups and political parties played a vital role in educating the populace. Although, the incredible roles of these institutions

are well acknowledged, however, it is argued that some election management bodies may have limited themselves to posters and direct engagement with the voters. Therefore, it is suggested that involving civil societies and Community Base Groups in the enlightenment can influence voter education campaigns. They should organize campaigns and engaged street theatre, role-playing, radio spots, jingles, songs, comic strips to ensure that all voters—women as well as men—have access to the information they need to participate intelligently in the voting process. The summary of the supposed roles of Civil Societies and Community Base Organizations in voter education entails the following.

1. They should organize training programs for the voters using the languages understood by the target communities about the rules, regulations, and procedures guiding the conduct of a particular election.
2. Help the government and the electoral bodies in spreading voter awareness, promoting voter literacy, and combating apathy toward the electoral process.
3. Help to educate vulnerable groups such as women and people living with disabilities on their equal rights of voting and be a vote for during each electioneering period.
4. Help propagate and promote the peaceful process of voting through educating the voters and election officials especially on issues regarding tempering, altering, and or manipulation of the election outcomes.
5. Participate and mediate in signing a peace agreement between and among competing interests at both the urban and grassroots areas to mitigate the eruption of violence.

CONCLUSION

In general, this article demonstrates the incredible roles of Civil Society Organizations when properly engaged in promoting free, fair, and transparent elections in Nigeria. It has understood that Civil Society Organizations have incredible roles in building a truly participative democracy in Nigeria by encouraging all eligible citizens to vote and make an informed decision during the elections. With support coming from many

other organizations as well, Civil Societies have demonstrated the popular commitment to open democratic processes at every level and reinforced the readiness for change and commitment to democracy among the Nigerian people. However, the further improves the ultimate roles of the voters, this study offers the following suggestion.

1. Since voter education is an ultimate pillar of Nigeria's Independent Electoral Commission, as an instrument through which it can increase voter turnout during elections are increasing, INEC should incorporate the Civil Society Groups into its voter education units. The synergetic approach will accelerate the learning process among the electorate and help improve voter knowledge of new accreditation procedures based on electronic voters' cards, as well as reduce the number of invalid votes during elections.
2. Since Civil Societies and Community Base Organizations are closer to the population, their synergy with the INEC will stimulate the formulation and implementation of policies to ensure participation of marginalized groups including persons with disabilities.
3. Since Civil Societies and Community Base Organization are nongovernmental and nonprofit groups, to promote their efficiency, the government should provide unconditional grants and other financial support. This will help prevent corruption and the collection of gratification from interest parties.
4. Beyond the government, local and foreign development partners are to participate in the provision of aids to soften the financial difficulties of the funding Civil Group.
5. Moreover, to prevent abuses of the Civil Society Organizations and the Community Base Organizations, the Nigeria Government should provide legislative frameworks to checkmate their operations.

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