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THE IMPERATIVE OF VOTER EDUCATION AND CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Voter education is the process of disseminating information, materials and programmes aimed at informing and guiding prospective voters about the rationale and importance of participating in the electoral process. Therefore, voter education and citizens' participation are germane to the sustenance of any democracy especially as Nigeria nurtures its nascent democracy. Successful voter education will ensure that all segments of the Nigerian voting populations are encouraged to participate in the electoral process and avoid being inadvertently disenfranchised. Voter education is also imperative because despite over sixteen years of democratic rule, most Nigerians are still apathetic to the electoral process judging from the low turnout of the Nigerian electorate during elections. With the aid of the purposive sampling method, ten Nigerian voters (five men and women each) were interviewed in Lagos State. Major reasons for voters' apathy include loss of confidence in the electoral process and poor voter education. Therefore, this paper examines the importance of voter education in enhancing citizens' participation in the electoral process and the capacity of major stakeholders in providing issue-based voter education. It also discusses the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing citizens' participation and strategies for fostering cooperation among

major stakeholders aimed at promoting voter education in Nigeria. The rational choice model and social exchange theory are adopted as the explanatory tools. Comprehensive voter education will enhance the participation of the Nigerian electorate which will ultimately culminate in successful general elections in 2019 and beyond.

Key words: Citizens, Elections, Voter Education, Electorates, Stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

The right to vote is the inalienable right of every eligible member of the Nigerian electorate, thus there is the need for voters to be properly informed about the electoral process and the choices they make in deciding their leaders and representatives. Nigerian voters need to be empowered with information which will ensure effective voter mobilisation and promote the democratic culture in Nigeria. Efforts must also be made to promote issue-based voter education as a critical component in the electoral process aimed at promoting effective representation and the democratic culture. Voter education helps to mobilise the electorate to register to vote, vote on the Election Day and protect their votes which ultimately increases political participation and accountability. If democracy is to be people-centred and seeks to improve the welfare of the people, then the voters must be well informed in order to choose the right candidates and hold them accountable (Vicente, 2010; Posner, 2004). Unfortunately, Nigerian politicians often succeed in stirring up ethnic, religious and primordial interests to secure votes, thus capitalising on the gross ignorance of voters and the obvious gaps in voter education. Thus, the quest to improve democratic culture requires that major stakeholders should address the problems associated with the electoral process in Nigeria, namely: poverty, greed, illiteracy, ignorance, voter apathy and electoral violence among others (Omobowale and Olutayo, 2007; INEC and FES, 2011). The importance of voter education and citizens' participation to the electoral process is aptly captured in the following quotes:

Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country, directly or through freely chosen representatives... The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections.... (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21).

Sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom government through its Constitution derives all its power and authority; the participation by the people in their government shall be ensured in accordance with the provisions of this constitution... Every citizen of Nigeria, who has attained the age of eighteen years residing in Nigeria at the registration of voters.....shall be entitled to be registered. (The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, Articles 14 and 77).

Ideally, voter education should be seen as a critical component in the electoral process aimed at ensuring that every eligible voter is adequately informed about his or her rights and obligations. But in Nigeria, civic education is seldom considered a major thrust in the election management process. This undermines the prospect of ensuring that in every election, the power of one man (woman), one vote which promotes transparency and integrity of the electoral process is achieved. Civic education will also assist in addressing myriad of problems confronting Nigeria. For instance, corruption, poor governance and political rascality, among others can greatly be reduced with well-informed electorates who will hold their leaders accountable on a regular basis. If the electoral process is compromised, the power of the electorates to choose and determine those who govern them will also be compromised. Voter education will thus promote voters' enlightenment, reduce the numbers of void votes and bring about desired attitudinal changes and transformation in Nigeria's electoral process. This paper discusses the importance of voter education in promoting citizens' participation in the electoral process. Likewise, effective voter education will promote the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria where all eligible voters are aware of their civic responsibilities and encouraged to discharge

these duties and roles as expected towards strengthening democratic culture in the country (Ghan, 2014; Lindberg and Morrison, 2005).

The importance of voter education to the success of the electoral process was aptly captured by Attahiru Jega when he inaugurated the National Interagency Advisory Committee on voter education and publicity charged with the responsibility of providing effective strategies for voter education (INEC and FES, 2011). The set up of this Advisory Committee underscores the importance of voter education in enhancing the electoral process and boosting citizens' participation. Voter education programmes should cut across different segments and locations in the country ranging from work places, schools, homes, to markets and motor parks among others (Bartels, 1996; Omotola, 2010).

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this paper is to discuss the importance of voter education in enhancing citizens' participation in the electoral process in Nigeria.

Specifically, the paper seeks to:

1. Examine the role of INEC, political parties and civil society in creating the required public awareness about the electoral process (through voter education) among the Nigerian electorate.
2. Assess the level of cooperation or synergy between or among major stakeholders towards promoting voter education in Nigeria.
3. Identify the roles of gender, socioeconomic factors (education and income) as well as cultural factors in influencing voter education and participation among the Nigerian electorates.
4. Proffer policy recommendations that can promote complementary efforts among stakeholders which will enhance voter education and encourage citizens' willingness to discharge their civic responsibilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Issue-based voter education will promote citizens' participation in elections and enhance the development of the democratic culture by ensuring that every eligible voters are informed about their roles, duties and obligations in the electoral process. In many liberal democracies and developing countries where democracy is gradually becoming the norm, enhanced voter education and citizens' participation are germane to the sustenance of democratic values and culture.

In a study by Collier and Vicente (2011) in Nigeria, it was established that public awareness campaigns (voter education) reduced the role of electoral malfeasance, empowered the electorate and encouraged them to oppose electoral violence. Unfortunately, recent experiences in Nigeria indicate a steady decline in voter education and citizens' participation, which constitute a major source of concern to many stakeholders, including INEC, because voters' apathy inevitably points to democracy deficit (Ghan, 2014; INEC and FES, 2011; Boudreau, 2009). In the 2015 general elections, Nigeria recorded an unimpressive voter turnout which have continued to slide unabated due partly to the heavy deployment of military troops during elections since 2012. The militarisation of elections has further discouraged (depleted) the population of the most willing members of the electorate. Since voter education is one of the legislated functions of INEC and other institutions in Nigeria as enshrined in Sections 2 and 153 of the Electoral Act, 2012 (as amended), then it is imperative that the challenges associated with the electoral process in Nigeria are addressed by INEC and other major stakeholders. With increasing voters' apathy during Nigeria's elections, efforts should be made to change the negative attitudes of Nigerians toward the electoral process so that every eligible voter will be empowered to make informed decisions and cast his or her votes for his or her preferred candidates without fear or intimidation. Clearly, voters' apathy and reluctance to participate in the electoral process can be linked to low awareness about the electoral process and ignorance of what is expected of them as voters (INEC and FES, 2011; Omobowale and Olutayo, 2007). This underscores the importance of voter education which

aims at informing the electorate and encouraging citizens' participation in the electoral process.

Rationale for Voter Education

Voter education has a long history that predates the conduct of modern elections. Civic education has its historical antecedents in the development of ancient democracies and state formations (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2013; Boudreau, 2009; Nugent, 2001). Formal education seeks, among other things, to promote public enlightenment and encourage citizens' participation in civic duties and the democratic process. For instance, the campaigns for universal franchise/suffrage in most developed countries like the United States and United Kingdom included voter education programmes aimed at promoting strong and nonpartisan public awareness. This is hinged on the fact that effective voter education empowers citizens to make informed political choices and hold their leaders accountable (Boudreau, 2009; Morrison, 2004). For example, the League of Women in the United States mobilised and empowered the female members of the electorate to make informed political decisions in the country. In Nigeria, INEC, political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations are largely responsible for voter education through the medium of public awareness prior to elections (pre-election voter education programmes). Unfortunately, the timing and contents of this 'civic education programme' seldom achieve the desired results (INEC and FES, 2011; DGD, 2014). One major constraint of the programme is that most voter education programmes are largely unstructured and poorly timed which inevitably hampers citizens' participation in the electoral process. Although, voter education is traditionally within the purview of election management bodies and political parties in Nigeria, these major stakeholders are often handicapped and unable to discharge this responsibility creditably. Recently, other stakeholders such as civil society organisations are getting involved in educating and mobilising the electorate and all segments of the populace in the electoral process (Lewin and Milgrom, 2004). In other words, different shades of relevant experiences and expertise are involved in voter education because these various backgrounds greatly influence the

approaches, contents, styles and strategies that are adopted in targeting different segments of the voting public (Boudreau, 2009; ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2013).

Voter education should cover different segments of the society, the social and political contexts within which elections are conducted, so that all eligible voters can be empowered to make informed and intelligent political decisions. This means that effective voter education programmes should be guided by historical antecedents and socio-political environments within which elections are planned, organised and conducted. For instance, the socio-cultural milieu in Nigeria definitely influences the politics and the electoral process in the country to a great extent. This underscores the need to ensure that the voter education programme is explicit about the procedure and circumstances under which elections are conducted. The inclusion of such valuable information will ensure that voters have access to useful information which will guide their decisions in the course of exercising their inalienable civic rights. Since a public awareness programme is a fundamental prerequisite for a successful election, statutorily, INEC, as an election management body, is expected to ensure that every eligible Nigerian voter is registered and given the opportunity to voluntarily cast his or her votes during elections without fear or intimidation (Lindberg, 2004; INEC and FES, 2011). But, experiences in Nigeria show that many voters are grossly uninformed about the electoral process which limits their active participation (INEC and FES, 2011; DGD, 2014). With effective voter education, most members of the electorate will be empowered and willing to participate in the electoral process because voters' apathy will be greatly addressed through appropriate voter education programmes (Hochschild, 2010).

Therefore, the best place to begin public sensitisation on the electoral process is to address the huge gaps between what voters 'should know' and 'what they actually know' about major strategies/mechanisms involved in the electoral process. Most Nigerian voters are not aware of the modalities for registration, locations of polling stations and timing or schedule of most elections (Omotola, 2010; INEC and FES, 2011; DGD, 2014). Others are ignorant of the rules of engagement/codes of conduct during

elections, the “dos” and “don’ts” as well as the implications of the use of money or inducements (“stomach infrastructure”) by candidates or their associates/agents to influence the electorate. These gaps in knowledge should be urgently addressed by INEC, political parties and civil society organisations through timely, robust, comprehensive and issue-based voter education.

Voter education is imperative because it is an effective strategy that can promote citizens’ participation in the electoral process. It will also assist in building confidence in the entire electoral process so that more Nigerians will be willing to participate in elections and other aspect of the electoral process leading to the emergence of credible representatives in the country. Effective voter education will encourage active citizens’ participation required to build a strong and virile democratic culture in Nigeria. It will also reduce cases of incomplete voters’ registers, voters’ apathy, gender gaps and youth’s indifference to the electoral process. This is because citizens’ participation will be anchored on voluntary decisions, motivation and persuasion rather than coercion or inducements to cast votes for any political party or candidate. Considering the cultural and ethnic diversity in Nigeria, attempts to promote citizens’ participation should focus on effective resource mapping and collaboration among major stakeholders which will ensure the active participation of Nigerian citizens who are deliberately left out of the main scheme of things in the country. Physically challenged individuals, women and older people are often not captured in voter education programmes in Nigeria. This gap should be addressed.

Since voter education is an empowerment strategy, it will reduce cases of irregularities and electoral problems that have perennially undermined the credibility and fairness of the electoral process in Nigeria. It has been established that voter education is closely linked to active citizens’ participation (high voter turnout) which clearly promotes accountability and legitimacy of governments (Collier and Vicente, 2011). The imperative of educating voters on their roles and responsibilities before, during and after elections should be seen as parts of the civic education programmes aimed at strengthening the democratic culture and values among Nigerians. This goal will be achieved if INEC, political parties and civil society

organisations intensify efforts at improving public education on the significance of voter education and the participation of eligible citizens in the electoral process. Section 154 of the Electoral Act, 2010, as amended, aptly captures the role of INEC in this regard, thus, "*the Commission shall have the power to conduct civic education and enlightenment in the print and electronic media to enhance its functions.*" It is hoped that INEC will discharge its responsibility to the electorates by conducting timely, comprehensive and issue-based voter education.

Similarly, Section 153 of the 1999 constitution, as amended, empowers INEC to conduct voter and civic education as well as promote sound knowledge of best practices in democratic governance and the electoral process. Definitely, INEC cannot discharge these responsibilities alone. Other major stakeholders such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), political parties, civil society organisations/institutions and mass media as critical stakeholders are allies in this regard. The role of the mass media is very critical in ensuring the success of voter education because of its widespread coverage and comprehensive machineries for the dissemination of information to different segments of the Nigerian population. Although voter education is a critical part of the electoral process, it is an expensive enterprise which cannot be made the sole responsibility of INEC and major political parties alone. Better results will be achieved in collaboration with major stakeholders (community-based organisations, political parties, mass media, civil society organisations and the labour movement) and other relevant agencies in Nigeria. Consequently, INEC needs to provide an effective framework (modalities) and means of collaborating with other major stakeholders which will foster cooperation (synergy) among stakeholders (partners). This synergy will promote the delivery of comprehensive voter education that will ensure citizens' participation in the electoral process.

Voter Education and the Electoral Process: Bridging the gaps

Voter education can be organised by a variety of organisations and individuals. This can be supported by election management bodies, political parties, the human rights commission and foreign/domestic civil society organisations. Voter education became increasingly important as more

countries embraced democratisation in Africa and Eastern Europe (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2013). This steady increase in democratisation process also underscores the importance of organised initiatives and programmes to stimulate and encourage citizens' participation in the electoral process. This is because a robust and effective voter education programme will produce an informed and vibrant electorate, who will be actively involved in the electoral process and empowered to engage their elected representatives.

With voter education, the election management body (INEC) and other major stakeholders will be actively supported to deliver free, fair and credible elections through the active participation of a well-informed and educated electorate. In other words, voter education will make the jobs of organising and conducting elections less cumbersome because eligible voters, who are empowered, will know the 'nitty-gritty' of the electoral process and they will be more than willing to support the process by registering, voting and defending their mandate. This shows that voter education is crucial to the success of the electoral process because it sensitises citizens on the importance of participating in the process. It also provides voters with relevant information, background attitudes, appropriate behaviours expected of citizens in ensuring peaceful, acceptable and credible elections geared towards stimulating and consolidating the democratic culture in Nigeria. Voter education also promotes citizens' mobilisation and empowerment which leads to effective organisation and activism by citizens in support of free and fair elections in Nigeria. Efforts should also be made to ensure that hurdles that can ultimately disqualify voters from participating in elections or leading to disenfranchisement are squarely addressed. Issue-based voter education will encourage political participation through three main stages, namely:

- i. It provides practical information on preelection and Election Day activities including voter education.
- ii. It ensures the integrity of the electoral process by emphasising voter rights.

- iii. It deters voter apathy through voter education and mobilisation (NDI, 2006).

Specifically, voter education programme should address the following areas among others:

- The rationale for registration and voting.
- Making public the timetable for registering or voting in the electoral process.
- The benefits of participating in the electoral process.
- The modalities, modes and procedure for registering voters (continuous voter registration).
- Strategies for encouraging citizens' participation in the electoral process.
- Empowering electorates on how to protect and defend their votes.
- Educating voters on how to report electoral abuses or malpractices.
- Ensuring effective electoral integrity and credibility.
- Administering appropriate deterrents or punishments for electoral frauds or malpractices.

Since voter education is a critical component of the electoral process, voters' apathy clearly indicates low voter education, voters' ignorance about the electoral process and loss of confidence in the election umpire. The former Ogun State Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC), Mr. Sam Olumekun corroborated the above fact succinctly, when he stated *inter alia* that; "*in the past, elections in Nigeria have been characterised by voter apathy, inappropriate thumbprinting and other vices which had retarded the electoral process. These had been largely blamed on inadequate voter education and high level of illiteracy prevalent in the country.*" (Olumekun, 2014:3) Therefore, one hallmark of democracy involves effective voter and civic education which helps to promote free,

fair and credible elections. Recent events show that previous elections in Nigeria were characterised by avoidable electoral problems and infractions which could have been prevented by adequate and effective voter education. For instance, low voter turnout and the numbers of void votes cast by the electorate can be drastically reduced by appropriate public awareness about the electoral process.

Similarly, with poor voter education, Nigerian politicians are able to manipulate voters and the electoral process to suit their own primordial interests. Unfortunately, most Nigerian voters have a poor knowledge of their rights which make them vulnerable to be 'used' as pawns by politicians who are desperate to win at all cost, practising "do or die politics" (NDI, 2006; INEC and FES, 2011; DGD, 2014)). But if Nigerian voters are properly educated and empowered about their rights, they will be able to resist the overtures of politicians and their agents as well as make their elected representatives more accountable to them through the use of the recall of nonperforming elected representatives in government (legislature) when necessary. In other words, the achievement of having an informed electorate will greatly improve the electoral process and assist in consolidating the democratic culture and dividends of democracy. A cursory look at the current political scenario in Nigeria shows that there is an urgent need for improved voter education to prevent subversion of the will of the people and subtle alienation and exclusion of Nigerian voters in the general elections (CDD, 2014).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rational Choice Model

The theory begins with the idea that individuals have preferences (attitudes, beliefs and values) and they make their choices based on these preferences. Rational choice model involves the process of determining what options are available to voters and then choosing the most preferred options based on certain consistent criteria (Levin and Milgrom, 2004). This model discusses the reason (rationale) for people's participation in the electoral process. In most cases, turning out to vote is the most common and often important indicator of political participation in any democracy.

Unfortunately, most Nigerian voters are often uninformed and engage in voting without understanding the rationale for participating in the electoral process (INEC and FES, 2011; DGD, 2014). This model argues that the 'fundamental equation' of political behaviour is that preferences (attitudes, beliefs, values) determine behaviours.

The rational choice theory is about how these preferences determine behaviours. The steps in the rational choice process include the following:

- i. Definition of the problem or issue at hand, i.e. voter education and political participation.
- ii. Identification of decision criteria.
- iii. Considering and weighing the criteria.
- iv. Generation of valid alternatives or options.
- v. Rating of each alternative on each criterion.
- vi. Computation of optimal decision.

For instance, if two candidates contest for an election, citizens will choose among three options or actions namely:

- i. To vote for one candidate of their choice.
- ii. To vote for the other candidate based on their preferences.
- iii. To abstain from voting entirely (Aldrich, 1993).

Therefore, voters' choice and preferences are largely influenced by their levels of knowledge and information which buttresses the importance of voter education. This enables voters to choose between or among candidates and ensure that their preferences and choices are respected. Citizens' preferences are transformed into outcomes or utilities, from which preferences for political participation (action) are inferred and voters' choices of actions are also determined (Althaus, 2003; Levin and Milgrom, 2004). Rational choice theory discusses how the expected utility associated with outcomes generates or reproduces preferences for particular actions. It further argues that individuals prefer outcomes with higher utility (value/satisfaction) compared to those with lower utility hence choosing actions that give more highly valued outcomes. Actions are the ways or means of obtaining desired ends or outcomes but these means have values in so far

as they affect outcomes. Therefore, actions are instruments or techniques for achieving outcomes, so votes are instrumental in achieving desired outcomes. These costs include the costs of obtaining information, processing the same and deciding on what to do in terms of registering and casting their votes during elections.

In the face of poor voter education, many Nigerian voters abstain from voting hence becoming exposed to the costs of abstention, that is, the decision making costs associated with why they do not rationally want to vote in elections. As citizens become more indifferent to the electoral process and outcomes, even low costs will become larger sources of barriers to voting and participation in the electoral process. With effective voter education, citizens would be encouraged to participate and cast their votes so that the political system can be strengthened which will ensure the development of a vibrant democratic culture. The sustenance of democracy is, therefore, one of the cardinal responsibilities of Nigerian voters (citizens) which also captures their obligations to their country and the electoral process. In any case, voters receive value from voting regardless of the outcomes of the elections. So, voting may be seen as an end in itself rather than a means to an end, that is, as an act of investment and obligation (Hinich, 1981; Aldrich, 1993; Boudon, 2003). The relevance of the rational choice theory lies in the fact that since Nigerian voters are poorly educated (ignorant) about the electoral process, they may not make rational choices and vote accordingly (INEC and FES, 2011; DGD, 2014). In the face of poor knowledge, Nigerian voters may confidently embrace a myriad of misconceptions that compromise their ability to discharge their civic obligations creditably. In most cases, the interests of the voters and the politicians are divergent which make the voters less empowered to determine or choose their representatives. With the high levels of poverty and ignorance among Nigerians, they become susceptible to misconceptions that allow them to be manipulated by the politicians. Since citizens' level of political knowledge is abysmally low, this clearly affects electoral outcomes and hinders democracy from thriving. If informed voters are to make a blind choice between politicians X and Y, they are likely to choose either in an unwary manners. With a high level of voter ignorance, the situations are grim; most voters are likely to make the wrong choices

(choosing candidates based on primordial interests or 'stomach infrastructure'). If voters base their preferences on deeply mistaken misconceptions, then they are likely to make wrong choices and choose 'unqualified' candidates. With voter education, majority of voters can be reasonably informed to choose more credible and qualified candidates despite their 'preferences and ignorance.'

Since human life is characterized by inadequate information and uncertainty, then, one major criticism against rational choice model is that real-world choices are often situational or context dependent. Many factors such as social contexts of decisions, emotional state of the decision maker and other environmental factors influence choices and behaviours of the electorate (Levin and Milgrom, 2004). This underscores the fact that social action and interactions are complex, thus rational choice model may not provide the most appropriate guide on how these actions occur on a daily basis (Hedstrom and Stern, 2008). Secondly, in reality, people seldom reason through every decision they make or consider many options before deciding on their choices. Most decisions or choices of voters are based on intuitive reasoning (heuristic) which seldom involves the consideration of many options or choices. Clearly, intuitive judgments may reflect preference maximisation in familiar environments (Levin and Milgrom, 2004). Thirdly, people make choices and decisions by simply 'muddling' through many options without necessarily going through the stages or steps provided in the rational choice model to reach rational decisions. Lastly, in most cases, decisions are often subjective with individuals likely to be both rational and irrational in reaching certain decisions.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

The social exchange theory is often traced to the works of George Homans (1961) and Peter Blau (1964). The social exchange theory looks at social behaviour as an exchange of activity, tangible or intangible and less rewarding or costly between at least two persons or parties (Homans, 1961). It deals with the anticipated rewards likely to emanate from interactions or relationships. Beyond the micro perspective (informal group relationship), the theory also discusses interactions at a more complex organisational level (formal group or institution). Homans (1961) asserted

that the main sociological purpose for studying processes of face-to-face interactions is to lay the foundation for an understanding of the social structures that evolve and the social forces that characterise their development. In any interaction or exchange, the parties assess the benefits and costs associated with their investment. If political parties and other major stakeholders value the voters, efforts will be made to keep them well-informed through voter education. Thus, the reason for poor voter education and low political participation in Nigeria can be linked to the fact that the political parties and elite believe that the voters have little or nothing to do with their mandate. Similarly, since the electorate are assessed as having a pretty low utility value or little resources to offer in the course of social exchange, their education and participation in the electoral process may not be encouraged. Unfortunately, the Nigerian electorate lack adequate resources required for social exchange because of poverty, age long deprivations compounded by poor national orientation programmes. These disadvantages undermine voters' potential social capital especially in the face of a highly volatile political environment. Three underlying assumptions are associated with the social exchange theory. First, the various actors (voters and major stakeholders) bring resources to interactions which may not necessarily be material and often times are unequal. Secondly, the actors will continue with interactions or exchanges only if on the long run the benefits they receive are greater than costs and in the absence of better alternatives. Thirdly, that exchanges are governed by norms of reciprocity, that is, when we give something, it is our hope (expectation) that something of equal or more value will be given back to us.

The relationship between the Nigerian political class and the voters is skewed in favour of the former which definitely manipulates the electoral process to suit the whims and caprices of the political elite. But with proper voter education, the Nigerian electorate will be more empowered and positioned to check the excesses of the political class and ensure that only credible candidates emerge as their representatives. Since the Nigerian electorate are negatively assessed as poor and uninformed, political actors and major stakeholders tend to be uninterested in engaging them in the electoral process. This limits their access to social capital and resources

which can improve their participation in the electoral process. The social exchange theory has not been extensively tested and its central concepts-costs and rewards - are not clearly defined. In reality, it is difficult to discern people's values and motives for participating in the electoral process. Some educated members of the society may refuse to be involved in the electoral process while some other individuals may be actively involved for altruistic reasons, without any expectation of rewards.

RESEARCH METHODS

The Study Population: The study was exploratory in nature, considering the paucity of empirical works on voter education and political engagement in Nigeria. The study population included ten men and women who had participated in the electoral process in Nigeria. The participants were young people (University of Lagos undergraduates and youths) and older people (both semiliterate and the educated elite such as academic staff and other professionals such as medical doctors and engineers) who were keen observers and monitors of the electoral process in Lagos State, Nigeria. The participants provided insights into the roles and importance of voter education and its impact on citizens' participation in Lagos State. The research was carried out between July and August, 2014 among Nigerians of voting age in Shomolu local government area, Lagos State, Nigeria. The sample size was primarily for exploratory purpose.

Sampling Technique and Research Instrument: Participants were selected based on the fact that they were of voting age, ever participated in any election in Nigeria and knowledgeable about the electoral process. Participants were chosen using convenience sampling method to examine the importance of voter education and the roles of INEC and other stakeholders in facilitating voter education and political participation among Nigerians. Participants were men and women in order to ascertain if there would be gender differences in people's understanding and assessment of voter education and their willingness to participate in the electoral process. The sampling method was primarily accidental because the researcher only discussed and interviewed adult Nigerians who were of voting age and interested in the study objectives. In all, the sample size was ten (10) consisting of men and women with three older adults and two younger

adults in each gender group. The sample size was chosen because the study was exploratory hence the choice of the qualitative research method to get in-depth information from the small-sized study population. The rationale for choosing six older adults was to tap from the wealth of experiences of older Nigerians and benefit from their analysis of the preparation and the buildup towards the 2015 general elections against the background of past electoral processes and the challenges of previous elections.

The research instrument for the study was the interview schedule designed to cover issues relating to an assessment of the electoral process in Nigeria. The schedule covered the contents and extent of voter registration, the relationship between voter education and political participation as well as the determinants of successful voter education. The article also benefited from discussions and observations of events and activities in the buildup towards the 2015 elections in Nigeria. The study was conducted primarily to explore the views and experiences of few member of electorate in Lagos State.

Methods of Data Analysis: Data were qualitative in nature hence content analysis was adopted to analyse the data using thematic thrust or structure. Data analysis was also done bearing in mind the major objectives of the study.

DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

General Impression about the Roles of INEC, Political Parties and Civil Society in Voter Education: Majority of participants (that is, more than half of the group) affirmed that elections were important and pivotal to the sustenance of the democratic culture and meaningful development in the country. Most participants (four out of five in each gender category) were not impressed with the roles of INEC and election management bodies in the discharge of their duties before, during and after elections. It was opined that voter education was often delayed till a few weeks to elections which did not give the electorate ample time to determine the best candidates for the various elective positions. Some candidates contesting for legislative seats were not even known to some members of

the electorate in their constituencies. This was considered critical because the election of credible leaders would engender democracy and development. Even when voter education was carried out, the process and strategies were also seen as haphazard and unstructured to achieve the desired results (objectives). The political parties were accused of failing to engage the voting public but often focused on their members alone.

The civil society organisations especially NGOs and other faith-based organisations were assessed as performing fairly better than the political parties in informing the public about the electoral process and the duties of the electorates to choose credible leaders and defend their votes within the ambit of the law. Poor voter education was also identified as a contributory factor to voters' apathy and poor voting behaviours such as poor voter turnout, void votes, vote buying and rigging, among others. For those who were impressed by the roles of INEC and political parties in voter education, they argued that since there was paucity of funds, voter education should only target election periods and not necessarily be seen as a continuous exercise. They were of the opinion that the mass media was awash with adverts and public awareness messages and information on voter education sponsored by INEC and many political parties. The minority group (that is, fewer than half of the group) also agreed with the majority (that is, more than half of the group) that NGOs and religious organisations, as major stakeholders, played pivotal roles in ensuring that Nigerian voters were properly informed to choose the best candidates for different elective positions. Majority of older electorate who had participated in previous elections expressed disappointment at the ways and manner INEC and political parties discharged their constitutional roles compared to previous years. Despite falling standards, older people were more engaged in the electoral process than younger voters who were more a political and uninterested.

Participants identified major hindrances to voter education and these included the failure of the political class and politicians to deliver dividends of democracy, the unpreparedness of the election management body (INEC) and the excesses of political parties. In terms of institutions and persons responsible for their apathy, politicians, government agencies and

Assessment of Co-operation and Synergy among Major Stakeholders: Half of the population (five out of ten respondents) believed that there was adequate cooperation between and/or among major stakeholders. The other half had a contrary opinion. There was also a gender differential in respondents' assessment of cooperation among major stakeholders. Majority of the respondents were dissatisfied with the levels of activities of these stakeholders because of poor performance and negligence of duties. An example was cited about the failure of INEC, the National Orientation Agency (NOA), political parties and the Ministry of Information to organise issue-based voter education and an unbiased public awareness for the Nigerian electorate to make informed decisions. Public (government) agencies and institutions were the worst culprits with many participants accusing them of being biased and 'unashamedly' propagating falsehood on behalf of their principals (the ruling party in the 2015 general elections). The mass media was adjudged to be fairly independent and objective in their reportage of the electoral process and the discharge of their constitutional role as the watchdog in the society aimed at creating awareness among Nigerians. But private and independent media houses were assessed to be fairly more objective than government owned media houses and agencies. This calls for concerted efforts to encourage objectivity and synergy between and among major stakeholders in the discharge of their roles and responsibilities.

Roles of Gender, Socio-economic and Cultural Factors in Voter Education and Political Participation: Most (eight out of ten) participants generally believed that so many factors were critical determinants of political behaviours in Nigeria. Participants opined that gender, socio-economic (education and income) and cultural factors played crucial roles in determining the success or otherwise of voter education in Nigeria. All participants believed that men were more informed about political issues and the electoral process because they were exposed to more voter education programmes than women who were 'culturally' expected to be less 'visible' in the public space. The socioeconomic status and cultural factors were also identified as critical factors that influenced voter education and political participation in Nigeria. Education, financial resources (income) and occupational status were high on the scale of

predictors of participation in the electoral process in Nigeria with voters with higher indicators of socio-economic status more likely to receive voter education and participate in the electoral process. This agrees with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory that the physiological needs are at the base of every man's needs and unless these basic needs are met, higher order needs may not be important. Most Nigerian voters with low socio-economic status were less engaged in the electoral process because of the belief that they did not have the educational qualifications and financial resources required to be actively involved in the electoral process (INEC and FES, 2011; DGD, 2014). On the other hand, some members of the upper class were not actively involved in the electoral process in terms of casting their votes except if they were candidates or had vested interests. To most participants, cultural constraints affected women more than men because of the erroneous societal perception that 'responsible' women should not be involved in politics while women in politics were considered women of 'easy virtues!' The role of patriarchy in limiting women's access to voter education in Nigeria is enormous and historical. This underscores the need for voter education to be comprehensive and holistic in covering the different segments of the population by liberating women from the shackles of customs and traditions. Every members of the electorate irrespective of his or her gender and socio-economic status should be deliberately targeted by the election management body (INEC) and other stakeholders involved in voter education.

Promotion of Complementary Efforts among Stakeholders will Enhance Voter Education and Citizens' Willingness to Discharge their Civic Responsibilities: All participants opined that INEC and its partners/other relevant agencies had a level of cooperation. Nevertheless, INEC was advised to develop an effective framework that will promote complementary efforts and synergy between and among stakeholders towards promoting issue-based voter education which will encourage the active participation of Nigerians in the electoral process in the 2019 elections and beyond. Other recommendations and policy suggestions are discussed below:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- INEC, in collaboration with other relevant agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), the Federal Ministry of Information and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), should develop strategic, systematic, and evidence-based processes that will promote voter education, civic engagement and the participation of Nigerians in the electoral process. This will facilitate increased and informed participation of Nigerian voters and improve the outlook of their participation in the electoral process.
- INEC, development partners and other major stakeholders should support inclusive, representative and comprehensive issue-based voter education towards meeting the gaps in voter registration and voting process identified by situational analysis and strategic planning.
- Effective strategies should also target marginalised citizens with a view to empowering them to make informed decisions before, during and after elections.
- INEC and other stakeholders should establish, build and maintain effective working relationships (synergy and cooperation) with staff and other major stakeholders aimed at achieving the desired goal of an all-inclusive voter education and citizens' participation objective in the electoral process.
- The political parties should deepen voter education among their members/supporters and Nigerians in general through continuous civic education aimed at establishing an electoral process that is violence-free, inducement-free and devoid of manipulation in Nigeria.
- Research institutes and educational institutions should fund and engage in evidence-based and scientific research exercises which will culminate in scientifically designed frameworks that will clearly state guidelines and effective cum comprehensive dissemination

of voter education information to all segments of the Nigerian voting population.

- Civil society organisations (CSOs), mass media and reputable professional bodies should engage in issue-based voter education that is guided by specific and comprehensive strategies, evidence-based advocacy and mandate protection as core components of the electoral process.
- Large segments of the electorate who are seldom covered by formal electoral information dissemination machineries or those who have developed an apathetic attitude towards electoral process or alienated from the mainstream electoral process should be deliberately targeted through appropriate voter education. These 'special' segments of the voting public should be deliberately targeted by the civil society organisations, special agencies of state and faith-based organisations to address these challenges.
- Mass media in partnership with INEC and political parties should provide unbiased reportage and voter education to the Nigerian electorate as its own contribution towards deepening the democratic culture in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This article has succinctly discussed the importance of voter education in promoting citizens' participation in the electoral process. The importance of voter education in deepening the democratic culture in Nigeria was also explored with the submission that informed voters are the most critical stakeholders in the electoral process. The roles of INEC and other relevant agencies in ensuring the delivery of issue-based voter education was also discussed with gaps noticed in the level of cooperation between INEC and other agencies which is a major constraint to successful voter education. Therefore, there is a need for synergy and cooperation between and among major stakeholders in ensuring effective and comprehensive voter education in Nigeria. The prospects and benefits of sustaining the democratic culture through comprehensive and issue-based voter education as well as

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