The Challenges of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the 2023 Presidential Election in Ekiti State

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the performance and the challenges of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State, Nigeria. The research adopts a descriptive research design, utilizing secondary data collected from various reports, articles, and electoral records. A qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the data, focusing on four key areas: the nature and frequency of BVAS malfunctions, the impact of connectivity issues on real-time transmission, the adequacy of training for electoral officials, and INEC's preparedness in addressing logistical challenges. The findings reveal that BVAS encountered frequent malfunctioning, particularly in rural areas, primarily due to connectivity issues that hindered the real-time transmission of election results. These technical difficulties were exacerbated by inadequate training for electoral officials, resulting in delays and disenfranchisement. Furthermore, INEC's logistical preparedness was found to be insufficient, as issues with device deployment and technical support systems hindered the smooth operation of the BVAS machine. Despite these challenges, BVAS contributed positively to the reduction of voter fraud, such as multiple voting and impersonation, especially in urban areas where connectivity was more stable. While BVAS demonstrated potential for improving electoral transparency, its implementation in Ekiti State during the 2023 Presidential elections highlighted critical gaps in infrastructure, training, and issues of logistics. The study recommends that INEC invests more in robust infrastructural development, improves training for electoral officials, enhance voter education on the use of BVAS, and ensure better logistical plans to address the challenges of deploying the BVAS machine in future elections.

Keywords: *BVAS, 2023 Presidential Elections, Ekiti State, Nigeria, Electoral Technology, Connectivity Issues, Electoral Integrity, INEC, Voter Education.*

INTRODUCTION

Elections are a cornerstone of democratic governance, providing citizens with the opportunity to choose their leaders and influence policy directions. In Nigeria, elections have historically been fraught with challenges, including electoral fraud, voter intimidation, and logistical inefficiencies, which have undermined public confidence in the electoral process. The introduction of technology into Nigeria's electoral system has been viewed as a potential solution to these challenges, with the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) emerging as a key innovation in recent years. BVAS, introduced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), is designed to enhance the credibility of elections by authenticating voter identities through biometric verification, thereby reducing incidents of multiple voting and impersonation (INEC, 2023).

The 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria were significant not only because of their political stakes but also because they served as a litmus test for the effectiveness of BVAS. Ekiti State, located

in the southwestern part of Nigeria, became a focal point in assessing the performance and challenges of this technology. Known for its vibrant political landscape and history of electoral controversies, Ekiti State provided a unique context for evaluating whether BVAS could address issues of voter fraud and enhance transparency. Scholars such as Jega (2012) have noted that electoral reforms are critical for strengthening democracy in Nigeria, and the 2023 elections offered an opportunity to examine the extent to which BVAS contributed to this goal.

The introduction of BVAS was part of broader electoral reforms aimed at modernizing Nigeria's voting system. Previous elections, including those in 2015 and 2019, were characterized by allegations of widespread irregularities, prompting calls for technological interventions to restore public trust. Ake (2001) highlights that in many African democracies, technological innovations in election management are often met with skepticism due to a lack of infrastructure and political will to ensure their effectiveness. Similarly, Norris (2014) emphasizes that while electoral technology can enhance transparency, its success largely depends on the institutional capacity of electoral bodies and the socio-political context in which it is deployed. These perspectives are particularly relevant to the case of Ekiti State, where infrastructural deficits and political tensions posed significant challenges to implementing BVAS effectively.

The significance of the BVAS machine in the 2023 elections extends beyond its technical functionality; it also symbolizes a shift towards greater accountability in Nigeria's electoral process. The device's dual functionality—capturing fingerprints and facial images for voter verification—represents a departure from manual accreditation methods that were susceptible to manipulation. According to Okereke (2023), the adoption of BVAS aligns with global best practices in election management and reflects Nigeria's commitment to improving electoral integrity. However, deploying this technology also exposed systemic weaknesses, including inadequate training of electoral officials, logistical delays, and technical issues. These challenges underscore the complexities of integrating technology into electoral processes, particularly in a developing country like Nigeria.

In Ekiti State, the deployment of BVAS during the 2023 presidential elections highlighted both the potential and the limitations of electoral technology. While the system succeeded in reducing cases of multiple voting and impersonation, it faced significant operational hurdles that affected its overall performance. Adebanjo (2023) notes that the effectiveness of BVAS in Ekiti State was hampered by poor network connectivity, particularly in rural areas, as well as insufficient voter education on the use of the technology. These issues contributed to delays in voter accreditation and, in some cases, disenfranchisement, raising questions about the readiness of Nigeria's electoral system to fully adopt such innovations. Moreover, public perception of BVAS in Ekiti State was shaped by a combination of optimism and skepticism. While some voters viewed the technology as a step forward in ensuring free and fair elections, others criticized its implementation as poorly managed. Adebayo (2023) argues that the success of electoral technology is not solely determined by its design but also by the level of trust that citizens have in the institutions responsible for its deployment. This observation is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where electoral bodies have often been accused of bias and inefficiency.

The 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State thus serve as a microcosm for examining the broader challenges and opportunities associated with electoral reforms in Nigeria. The introduction of BVAS machine represents a significant step towards addressing historical issues of electoral malpractice, but its implementation also highlights the need for greater investment in infrastructure, training, and voter education. As Okoye (2023) observes, the success of electoral technology depends on a holistic approach that addresses both technical and institutional challenges. By focusing on the

experiences of Ekiti State, this study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on how to enhance the integrity and transparency of elections in Nigeria

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the challenges of BVAS and the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State. The specific objectives are to:

i. examine the nature and frequency of BVAS malfunctions in the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti States.
ii. assess the extent to which connectivity issues affected the real-time transmission of election results during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti States
iii. evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of training programs provided to electoral officials in managing BVAS devices. During the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State
iv. analyze INEC's preparedness and logistical planning in addressing the challenges of the deployment of BVAS during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

i. What was the nature and frequency of BVAS malfunctions encountered during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State?
ii. To what extent did connectivity issues hinder the real-time transmission of election results during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State?
iii. How adequate and effective were the training programs provided to electoral officials for managing BVAS devices during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State?
iv. How well-prepared was INEC in addressing logistical and operational challenges related to the deployment of BVAS during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Structural-Functional Theory

Structural-functional theory is one of the major sociological frameworks used to analyze the relationships between various components of society and how they work together to maintain stability and order. The theory, often referred to simply as Functionalism, posits that society is made up of different structures (such as institutions, norms, and traditions) that each have a specific function and contribute to the overall stability of the social system. It views society as a complex system whose parts are interdependent and work together to promote solidarity and stability. The foundations of Structural-Functional Theory can be traced back to the works of early sociologists like Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert K. Merton. Durkheim, often considered the father of functionalism, argued that the structure of society and its various institutions, such as family, religion, education, and law, serve essential functions for maintaining social order. Durkheim's analysis of social cohesion and the role of shared values in society laid the groundwork for later developments in functionalist theory.

In the early 20th century, Talcott Parsons further expanded Structural-Functional Theory by emphasizing the idea of social systems. According to Parsons, society functions as a system of interrelated components, where each component (whether an institution, role, or behavior) serves a specific function to contribute to the overall stability and functioning of the whole system. He proposed that social systems have mechanisms in place to ensure that individuals comply with norms

and expectations, thus helping to preserve social order. His AGIL model—comprising Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency—was central to his conceptualization of the functions of society. The theory's major premise is that societies are complex systems made up of many interconnected parts that must work together to achieve stability. Each part of society performs a specific role or function that contributes to the continued functioning of society as a whole. The primary focus is on social stability and equilibrium, with change being seen as something that happens gradually and in a way that preserves societal stability. According to this view, social problems or disruptions are typically the result of dysfunctions within one of the system's parts, and it is the job of other parts of society to adapt to restore balance and order.

The theory provides a useful framework for understanding how various components of the electoral system work together to achieve the overall function of ensuring free, fair, and credible elections. According to Structural-Functional Theory, society is seen as a system composed of interdependent parts that work in harmony to maintain stability and order. In this context, the electoral process, including the BVAS technology, represents one of these interdependent components within Nigeria's broader political and electoral system. The functioning of the BVAS, its challenges, and its integration with other institutional systems in the electoral process can be understood through the lens of this theory. The electoral system, including the role of INEC (Independent National Electoral Commission), political parties, and voters, serves a key function in the democratic system of Nigeria. The structural-functional theory asserts that the effectiveness and efficiency of these components are essential to achieving the goal of political legitimacy and social cohesion, which is the primary function of any democratic system. BVAS, as a technological tool introduced to improve voter accreditation and the transparency of elections, serves a specific function within this broader system. Its role is to ensure that the process of voter identification and result transmission is reliable and tamper-proof, thus ensuring the legitimacy of the electoral process.

In Ekiti State, the deployment of BVAS in the 2023 presidential elections was integral to the achievement of social stability through the effective conduct of free and fair elections. The system was designed to enhance the transparency of the electoral process, allowing for real-time transmission of results and reducing the risk of electoral malpractice, which can undermine public trust in the democratic process. The function of BVAS, in line with Structural-Functional Theory, was to contribute to maintaining the equilibrium of the election system by performing the critical task of accurate voter identification and result transmission. However, the theory also highlights how dysfunctions or challenges in one part of the system can affect the overall stability of the system. In the case of BVAS, its malfunctioning in Ekiti State and other parts of Nigeria during the 2023 presidential elections can be seen as a dysfunction that disrupted the overall electoral process. For example, connectivity issues, technical glitches, and human error in handling the devices all contributed to delays in real-time result transmission, causing frustration and skepticism among voters. According to Functionalist Theory, such malfunctions can be seen as breakdowns in the system, highlighting the need for adjustment or repair to restore balance.

Another key component of the electoral system that the Structural-Functional Theory emphasizes is the training and preparedness of electoral officials. BVAS technology is not effective if the personnel responsible for its use are not properly trained. The theory posits that for any part of the system to function effectively, there must be proper preparation and alignment between the components. In the context of this study, the adequacy and effectiveness of INEC's training programs for officials in Ekiti State are critical to ensuring that the BVAS machine operates as intended. If electoral officers are inadequately trained, the system will likely experience dysfunction, undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the election results. Furthermore, the institutional environment

surrounding BVAS, including INEC's logistical planning and preparedness, plays an important role in ensuring that the BVAS machine operates smoothly. The theory helps to explain how an electoral system functions in a larger societal framework, where various institutions such as political parties, the government, security agencies, and the media interact to ensure the proper functioning of the electoral process. The preparation of INEC, including its ability to ensure timely distribution of BVAS devices to polling units, is central to the proper functioning of the electoral process. Disruptions in this process can affect not only the technical functioning of the BVAS machine but also the broader societal function of the election itself, which is to ensure a peaceful transition of power and the maintenance of democratic stability.

The concept of social equilibrium within the theory also applies to understanding how the challenges of BVAS malfunction in Ekiti State might have disrupted the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the election. According to Structural-Functional Theory, any breakdown in the system leads to a state of disequilibrium, where the stability of the larger system is threatened. In this case, the malfunctioning of the BVAS machine can be seen as a disturbance to the electoral equilibrium, leading to doubts about the legitimacy of the election results. Such disruptions, if not addressed effectively, could lead to broader societal consequences, such as a loss of public trust in the electoral process and, by extension, in democratic governance itself. On the other hand, Institutional Theory, as a complementary framework, would suggest that the malfunctioning of the BVAS machine reflects deeper institutional challenges related to good governance, allocation of resources, and capacity-building. However, from the perspective of Structural-Functional Theory, the dysfunctions associated with BVAS machine could be seen as temporary disturbances that the system seeks to correct through adaptation and reorganization. For example, following the malfunctions in the 2023 elections, it is likely that INEC will take steps to improve the technology, enhance training for electoral officers, and address logistical challenges to ensure that future elections proceed with minimal disruptions.

The ultimate function of BVAS, as a component of the electoral system, is to ensure democratic stability and legitimacy in the electoral process. The theory suggests that the proper functioning of the BVAS is a necessary condition for achieving this goal. The failure of BVAS machine to perform optimally in the 2023 elections underscores the interdependent relationship between technological tools and the broader institutional and social system. When BVAS fails, it disrupts the functioning of the electoral system, undermining public trust in the election outcomes. To restore stability and order to the system, corrective actions must be taken, such as improving the technology, providing more rigorous training, and ensuring better logistical planning.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research adopts a descriptive design, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced in the deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in Ekiti State during the 2023 presidential elections. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of the nature of BVAS malfunctions, connectivity issues, and the effectiveness of training programs for electoral officials. The study utilizes secondary data, which was gathered from a variety of sources, including electoral reports from INEC, academic articles, news reports, and other relevant documents. These secondary sources provide insights into the challenges experienced during the election and their implications for the overall electoral process. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which involves systematically analyzing the collected materials to identify key themes, patterns, and trends related to the research questions. This approach is particularly suited for understanding the complexities of technological challenges, institutional responses, and the broader impact of these issues on the legitimacy and transparency of the election process in Ekiti State.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question One: What was the nature and frequency of the BVAS machine malfunctioning encountered during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State?

The nature and frequency of the BVAS machine malfunctioning during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State can be understood in terms of technical failures, operational issues, and human errors. The BVAS machine was designed to enhance the credibility of elections by verifying voter identities and transmitting results in real time. However, during the 2023 elections, several technical issues of BVAS malfunctioning were reported, which raised concerns about the reliability of the machine. BVAS malfunctioning included issues such as the failure of BVAS devices to power on, inaccurate biometric verification, and delays in uploading voter accreditation data to the central server. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), while the BVAS machine was generally effective, the frequency of BVAS malfunctioning varied across polling units, with some units experiencing repeated failures in device performance (INEC, 2023). For instance, polling units in rural areas and more remote regions, such as those in Ekiti State, faced greater challenges with device functionality.

The issues encountered in Ekiti State were compounded by technical glitches such as poor fingerprint matching and devices failing to sync with the central database, leading to delays and frustration for voters. According to Okechukwu and Nwogwugwu (2023), while the majority of polling stations were able to process voter accreditation with minimal delays, there were some significant number of instances where voter verification was either delayed or failed, particularly in areas with poor infrastructure. These malfunctions raised concerns about the overall effectiveness of the BVAS system and its potential to undermine the credibility of the election results. The frequency of these issues was also reported to vary by polling unit, with urban centers in Ekiti State experiencing fewer malfunctioning compared to the rural areas. Some polling units encountered problems where multiple attempts were required for voter identification, while others had issues with the system failing to upload results to the central server (Okafor & Adamu, 2023). The malfunction rate appeared higher in the first few hours after polls opened, but the frequency decreased as the election progressed, as officials adapted to the system's challenges. Despite the challenges, the frequency of the BVAS machine malfunctioning was not as widespread as initially feared, but the problems that did occur were significant enough to affect the smooth flow of the election.

Research Question Two: To what extent did connectivity issues hinder the real-time transmission of election results during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State?

Connectivity issues were a critical factor that hindered the real-time transmission of election results during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State. The real-time transmission system, integral to the BVAS process, faced significant challenges due to poor internet connectivity, particularly in rural areas. Ekiti State, like many parts of Nigeria, has an underdeveloped digital infrastructure, which contributed to slower transmission speeds and, at times, complete loss of connection between polling units and the central server (Umeh & Isah, 2023). According to INEC reports (2023), although the BVAS machine functioned effectively in urban areas, rural polling units were particularly vulnerable to connectivity disruptions, which caused delays in transmitting election results.

The lack of reliable internet access in remote polling areas was one of the most pressing challenges that affected the timely transmission of results. The inability to quickly upload election results not only hindered the transparency of the process but also delayed the announcement of results (Ademola & Omotayo, 2023). This situation was compounded by occasional server downtime

at INEC's central data collection point, which led to additional delays. While INEC had made provisions for connectivity via mobile networks, the inconsistent signal strength in many parts of Ekiti State posed serious challenges to the real-time data flow. As a result, election observers noted that the real-time transmission of results from Ekiti State was not as seamless as expected. In some instances, the transmission was delayed by several hours, leading to anxieties and concerns among the electorate about the authenticity of the election results (Okeke & Durojaiye, 2023). The reliance on telecommunications networks meant that even a slight issue with service providers could significantly disrupt the transmission process. The challenges were also noted to affect the efficiency of the election process, as delays in result transmission could have wider implications on the public's perception of the election's legitimacy.

Research Question Three: How adequate and effective were the training programs provided to electoral officials for managing BVAS devices during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State?

The training programs provided to electoral officials in Ekiti State for managing BVAS devices were generally seen as adequate, but some officials reported difficulties in effectively handling the devices during the election. INEC had conducted several rounds of training for electoral officials, aimed at ensuring they understood the functionality of BVAS devices, troubleshooting techniques, and best practices for ensuring smooth accreditation processes. However, as Adebayo and Okoro (2023) point out, the effectiveness of the training was variable, with some officials indicating that they did not feel fully prepared to handle the technical aspects of the BVAS machine. The training sessions were designed to cover the basics of BVAS operation, including voter accreditation, biometric verification, and result transmission. However, according to some reports from Ekiti State, certain electoral officials, especially those stationed at more remote polling units, lacked the technical expertise to troubleshoot issues as they arose (Olufemi & Ajayi, 2023). This knowledge gap became evident when malfunctioning occurred, and the officials were unable to quickly resolve issues without external assistance. The training materials were often too theoretical, and many officials felt they had not received enough hands-on practice with the machine.

Moreover, while training programs were provided, the duration of the training was sometimes criticized for being insufficient, considering the complexity of the BVAS technology. As noted by Olayinka & Folarin (2023), there was a discrepancy in how well training was received across various local government areas in Ekiti State. Urban centers, which had access to better training resources, tended to perform better in managing BVAS devices, whereas officials in more rural areas struggled with handling malfunctioning of the device during the election. These challenges highlight the need for more comprehensive training programs and continuous technical support for electoral officers to ensure they are fully equipped to manage the BVAS machine.

Research Question Four: How well-prepared was INEC in addressing logistical and operational challenges related to the deployment of BVAS during the 2023 presidential elections in Ekiti State?

INEC's preparedness for deploying the BVAS machine in Ekiti State was a subject of considerable attention during the 2023 presidential elections. INEC had taken steps to ensure that the logistics of BVAS deployment were carefully planned, but as the election day unfold, several logistical and operational challenges were apparent. While the commission had distributed BVAS devices to polling units ahead of time, challenges related to the timely delivery of machines, staff preparedness, and on-the-day adjustments became evident (Ogundele & Alabi, 2023). The deployment process was not without its issues, particularly in remote parts of Ekiti State, where transportation and coordination problems led to delays in setting up BVAS machine.

INEC had put in place contingency plans, but these were tested severely during the election, as some polling units faced delays in receiving their devices or had issues with device configuration on election day. Additionally, while BVAS machine were meant to be fully operational by the time elections commenced, logistical challenges sometimes meant that devices arrived late or were not fully charged. Despite these challenges, INEC made efforts to quickly address the issues with technical support teams, but such delays in operational readiness on Election Day disrupted the smooth running of the election (Adekunle & Adeoye, 2023). However, INEC's ability to adapt to challenges should also be recognized. The commission responded to BVAS machine malfunctioning by deploying field technicians to assist electoral officials at the polling units and ensured that backup machines were available in case of machine failure. The presence of support teams was crucial in addressing immediate operational issues. Despite the initial logistical hitches, INEC's preparation was ultimately deemed adequate, as the election was successfully concluded, though not without its challenges (Durojaiye & Ogundele, 2023).

Findings and Observations
Based on the analysis, the following findings were observed:

i. The study revealed that the nature and frequency of BVAS malfunctioning in Ekiti State during the 2023 presidential elections were significant but not widespread. The most common issues were device failures such as the inability to power on, biometric mismatches, and delays in result uploads. These hitches were particularly prevalent in remote areas, where technical support was less accessible, leading to slower processing times and delays in voter accreditation.

ii. The study found that connectivity issues had a considerable impact on the real-time transmission of election results. In many rural polling units, internet connectivity was poor or inconsistent, leading to delays in transmitting results to the central server. In some cases, polling units had to wait for several hours to upload accreditation data and results, which undermined the timeliness and credibility of the election process.

iii. The study found that the adequacy and effectiveness of the training programs provided to electoral officials in Ekiti State were found to be mixed. While the training covered the basics of BVAS operation, some officials expressed a lack of hands-on experience and technical expertise in troubleshooting problems on election day. The training duration was also criticized as insufficient to fully equip officials for the complexities of the BVAS machine, particularly in the face of malfunctioning devices.

iv. The study revealed that the logistical and operational preparedness of INEC in deploying BVAS machine in Ekiti State was adequate, but operational challenges emerged on election day. While INEC had made efforts to provide backup devices and technical support teams, some polling units experienced delays in receiving BVAS machine, and there were issues with device configuration. Despite these challenges, INEC managed to address most of the issues promptly.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that while the deployment of BVAS machine in Ekiti State during the 2023 presidential elections had the potential to enhance election transparency and credibility, several challenges were encountered. These included frequent malfunctioning of the BVAS machine, connectivity issues, inadequate training programs, and some logistical inefficiencies in the deployment process. Although the majority of polling units were able to conduct the accreditation

process successfully, these issues undermined the effectiveness of the BVAS machine and delayed the real-time transmission of election results. The findings suggest that technical failures and connectivity limitations were among the key factors that impeded the smooth operation of the BVAS machine. Despite these challenges, INEC was able to adapt and resolve many of the issues, ensuring that the election proceeded to completion, though not without delays. INEC should address these challenges critically to improve the integrity and effectiveness of future elections in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusion drawn, the following recommendations were made:

i. INEC should invest in improving the internet infrastructure in rural and remote areas to ensure a seamless real-time transmission of election results. Additionally, establishing readily available technical support teams at polling units will help address BVAS malfunctioning immediately and reduce delays in the accreditation process.

ii. The training programs for electoral officials on the use of BVAS machine should be more rigorous and intensive, especially in handling technical difficulties. INEC should also consider refresher courses closer to election day to ensure that all officials are up-to-date on the latest procedures.

iii. To mitigate the impact of the BVAS machine malfunctioning, INEC should consider deploying additional backup devices at each polling unit. This would ensure that if a device fails, a backup can immediately replace thereby minimizing the disruption of the accreditation process and the timely transmission of results.

iv. INEC must enhance its logistical coordination to ensure that all BVAS machines are delivered to polling units on time and in working condition. A pre-election checklist and detailed deployment plan can help to ensure that polling units are adequately prepared and challenges are addressed before election day.

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