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THE DEPLOYMENT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT), POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND NIGERIA'S ELECTIONS, 2015-2023

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ABSTRACT

The paper delved into political participation, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and elections in Nigeria. Anchored on Digital Democracy Theory (DDT) or E-Democracy as its theoretical framework, the paper made use of secondary sources of data such as textbooks, scholarly journals, newspapers, internet resources, *Yiaga African Reports*, government publications, etc., as the method of data collection. Data extracted from these sources were content analysed. The paper was therefore designed to examine whether the introduction of ICT has improved the citizens' participation in elections and to know the implications of citizens' participation through ICT on democratic stability in Nigeria. The deployment of ICTs in elections has not improved the citizens' participation because it indicates a downward trend in voter turnout. It portends danger or negative implications to democratic stability. These dangers include democratic ill health, erode legitimacy, weaken democratic institutions, increase the influence of a special group and undermine the substance of representative democracy. The paper concluded that the deployment of ICTs in the conduct of elections have not significantly enhanced voter turnout, thus having debilitating implications on democratic stability in Nigeria. It is recommended that the government should build trust in elections and make citizens' votes count in order to restore public's trust in Nigeria's democracy.

Keywords: Elections, Information and Communication Technology, Political Participation, Democracy, Voter Turnout

INTRODUCTION

Globally, states that practice democratic governance expect the political participation of their citizens because one of the basic features of a democratic order is the citizens' participation in the affairs of their states. Electing leaders into various offices is one of the citizens' obligations. This duty does not only create a sense of belonging in governance but also confers legitimacy on the ruler(s) in the state(s).

Thus, scholars have emphasised the importance of political participation in a democratic setting. For instance, Ikelegbe (1995) states that political participation should give the governed the opportunity to express their demands, orientations, preferences, interests, and judgments to the political systems. According to him, political participation involves three acts. First, it is the activity directed at selecting the rulers. Two, it has to do with participating in and influencing public policies and three, it is voluntary. Ikelegbe's (1995) views suggest that political participation involves the conduct of elections at regular intervals in a state. Besides, citizens are expected to freely make their contributions to the policies of the state.

The conduct of the election stands out among the aforementioned acts. Election constitutes a *sine qua non* to democratic governance in a climate where democracy is being practised. The reason is that election remains the most popular form of political participation across the world, and citizens' participation constitutes 60-65% (Political Participation Index, 2024; Kapsa, 2020). Political scientists have also confirmed that a significant activity through which people's opinions are ably represented in decision-making is through the act of voting. Therefore, as one of the basic features of democracy, each citizen is supposed to vote and each vote counts (Longley, 2021).

Most countries of the world now practice a democratic system of governance, thus making elections an opportunity for citizens to choose their leaders. Although election remains a basic

way to choose these leaders, the conducts of elections are always riddled with irregularities (Awopeju, 2009; Awopeju, 2011; Animasaun, 2022). The reason for irregularities in the conduct of elections is associated with the manual or paper-based conduct of elections. In order to address this problem in recent times, technologies have been deployed to curb electoral malfeasance. The inclusion of ICT in the process has reduced human ingenuity in its database because the manual transmission of election results is hardly released on time (Aguyai, Ojakorotu & Folorunso, 2023).

The Nigerian state started the use of ICT in its electoral process in 2011 (Awopeju, Afolabi & Agunyai, 2024) due to the 2007 flawed elections, though its administration in the election was first observed in the 2015 general elections (Alayande, 2022). With the use of ICT in the electoral process, the participation of citizens in elections seems to have reduced. In view of this, the issues of election, ICT and political participation have attracted considerable critical attention from scholars and the government in recent times. The existing scholarly works have focused on the effect, role of ICT, presidential election and political participation, electoral development and challenges in the conduct of elections (Iwuoha, 2018; Ogbeide, 2022; Chukwuma, 2022; Abdulkadir, 2021; Assibong & Oshanisi, 2018; Awopeju, 2012; Epelle, Asiegbu & Anderson, 2024). However, studies on elections, information and communication technology (ICT) and political participation have not received much scholarly attention. In other words, the implications of deploying ICT in the conduct of elections and citizens' participation in democratic governance are still insignificant.

Given this background, the paper examines political participation and the deployment of ICT in Nigeria's elections (2015-2023). The scope was chosen because electoral technology was first administered in the conduct of the election in 2015, and subsequent conduct of elections followed suit. The questions regarding the operation of the electoral technology are as follows: Has the introduction of ICT improved the citizens' participation in elections? Whether it is or not, what are the implications of citizens' participation through ICT on democratic stability in Nigeria?

The responses to these questions are provided through the use of secondary data such as scholarly journal articles, textbooks, newspapers, internet sources, African Yiaga Reports, etc. The rest of the paper is organised in this manner: conceptual clarification, theoretical framework, deployment of ICT in elections, political participation, and the implications for democratic stability, conclusion, and recommendations.

CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

Election

Election represents a mechanism for engendering a government based on the consent of the people. In his view, Sharman (2000) posits that an election is a mechanism that assures the expression of popular will through representation in government and guarantees seamless political recruitment and succession. For Rokkan (1970: 147), elections are institutionalised procedures for choosing office holders by the electorate. Similarly, but more elaborately, elections are rituals of choice, their binding character being derived from the participation of the individuals as a chooser in a social act which confers legitimate authority on a chosen person (Makenzie cited in Olurode, 2004). In his view, Ojo (2003) examines election beyond a mechanism or institutionalized procedure of choosing office holders. He is of the opinion that election does not only serve as purpose of peacefully changing of government, it also enhances and confers legitimacy on government. Apparently, "elections are institutional mechanisms that implement democracy by allowing citizens to choose among candidates or issues" (Ojo, 2013: 7).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

This refers to the infrastructure and components that enable modern computing (Kirvan et al, 2025). In a broader sense, Karl (1961) conceives ICT as the acquisition, processing, storage and dissemination of vocal, pictorial, textual and numerical information by a microelectronic based combination of computing and telecommunication. Similarly, Bashir (undated) sees ICT as

anything that renders data, information or previewed knowledge in any visual format whatsoever, via any multimedia distribution mechanism. For this study, ICT encompasses the internet as well as mobile infrastructures powered by wireless networks. It is an extensional term for information technology (IT) that stresses the role of the unified communications and the integration of telecommunications and computers, as well as necessary enterprise software, middleware, storage and audiovisual, that enable users to access, store, transmit, understand and manipulate information.

Political Participation

It is an activity a citizen engages in to influence their government. It is further defined as an action a citizen takes to influence their political system (www.study.com). Similarly, it is the citizens' level of participation in the political process. The political processes include voting, contribution to political debate, involvement in policy making and implementation, campaigning, lobbying, financing a candidate in an election, attending party meetings, etc. In light of these political processes, political participation is loosely defined as citizens' activities in politics (Van Deth, 2021). Similarly, but elaborately, Verba & Nie (1972) conceive political participation as those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government officials and or the actions they take. In a broader sense, political participation related to elections encompasses all actions citizens taken to influence the election process and outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is guided by Digital Democracy Theory (DDT) or E-Democracy. This theory is associated with the works of prominent scholars such as Roslyn Fuller, Gianluca Sgueo, Pippa Norris, Steven Clift, etc (Liz, 2009)., but the main proponent of this theory is Steven Clift. The proponents argue that by promoting transparency in decision-making processes, e-government can empower all citizens to observe and understand the proceedings. In addition, if they possess overlooked data, perspectives, or opinions, they can contribute meaningfully.

This contribution extends beyond mere informal disconnected debate; it facilitates citizen engagement in the proposal, development, and actual creation of a country's laws. In this way, e-democracy has the potential to incorporate crowd-sourced analysis more directly into the policy-making process. It specifically emphasises the use of ICT in governance and political processes. By using 21st century ICT, e-democracy seeks to enhance democracy, including aspects such as e-government and civic technology. The theory recognises the formative potential of technology for democracy while acknowledging the challenges and risks. The DDT examines how digital technologies reshape democratic processes, encompassing both the opportunities and challenges for deliberation, participation, and even decision-making. It discusses how technology can aid collective intelligence and civic engagement, while also considering the potential for control and isolation. Nevertheless, digital democracy is not just about reimagining how democracy itself can function in a digitally mediated world.

The theory is relevant to this study because the application of ICT in the conduct of elections will reshape democracy through its opportunities by curbing electoral fraud and enhancing the easy conduct of elections, thus consolidating democracy in Nigeria. The use of ICT also unveils the challenges of electoral participation, such as lack of internet connectivity, illiteracy, the nature of the Nigerian state and low participation.

DEPLOYMENT OF ICT IN ELECTION, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC STABILITY IN NIGERIA

Of all the means to ascend to power, election remains the best because it is based on popular sovereignty, and if properly conducted, it accords legitimacy to the government. Elections play a significant role in promoting democratic progress and should be conducted with ultimate credibility and transparency. Nigeria, being the largest democratic setting in Africa, has issues with the

conduct in the pre- and post-1999 elections. In other words, irregularities are associated with the conduct of elections in Nigeria.

In order to ensure transparency, avoid tension, coercion and violence, continuation of the democratic system so as to conform to international standards, ICT remains not an option but a necessity in the conduct of elections in Nigeria. Although successive Nigerian governments have secured the conduct of elections by policing them, the conduct of these elections was still flawed by various rigging techniques such as vote-buying, ballot snatching, and electoral violence (Awopeju, 2020). In view of this, the use of technology on a global scale has become necessary and imperative to enhance electoral processes worldwide, particularly in Nigeria.

Goar & Madugu (2023) while suggesting technological opportunities in the conduct of elections said that electoral technologies have influenced Nigeria's electoral process positively by ensuring greater transparency, efficiency and security. Besides, the use of technology has the "potential to drastically limit electoral violence because, as long as the polling centres are well secured, political thugs will have little or no influence over proceedings as the result could be transmitted within minutes or seconds to the Centre" (Guardian, 2002: 3; Goar & Madugu, 2023: 281).

Also, the use of technologies has motivated and equipped Nigerians to participate actively in the electoral process. Titus & Aluko (2023) confirm that Nigerians were able to participate actively in the 2015, 2019 and 2023 electoral process, more than ever before particularly through internet campaigns. Consequently, the adoption of biometric voter identification devices in Nigeria from 2019 to the present is expected to have reduced the likelihood of election fraud and manipulation, thus resulting in a more credible and voting process.

Furthermore, technologies can speed up the transmission and computation of results. In other words, they make the declaration of results faster relative to the conventional way of paper recording and collation of results. The argument is that when results are digitalized, it reduces delays and the possibility of tampering with results, thus accelerating the compilation and publication of results online.

Nigeria has been further encouraged to use technology in the conduct of election through the 2022 Electoral Act. A number of technologies had been used in the conduct of elections in the Fourth Republic. These include the following:

- (a) Direct Data Capture Machine (DCC),
- (b) Electronic Voters' Register,
- (c) Smart Card Reader,
- (d) INEC Voter Enrolment Device (IVED),
- (e) Online Voter Registration System (OVRs),
- (f) Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), and
- (g) INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV).

The use of ICT in the electioneering process could be traced to 2011 general elections, though it was not deployed for the conduct of elections. Nigeria's electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), deployed it for the first time to conduct election in 2015. The Siamese twins of Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) and Smart Card Reader (SCR) were used in the electioneering processes. The PVC and SCR were used as verification of voter's identity *vis-à-vis* the biometrics of the voters as their information is entrenched to the cards. These technological innovations were meant to deter electoral fraud so as to facilitate the true identification of voters' identity (fingerprint and display) before voting. This is one of the attractions of technologies in the electoral process.

With the introduction of these innovations, Nigeria has had three general elections. Following the deployment of technologies in the Nigeria's electoral processes, a number of voters were registered. Prior to 2015 general election, Nigeria's population was 190,671,878 and 67,422,005 were registered. This depicts 35.36 %. The total number of registered voters *vis-a-vis* the total number of actual voters was 43.65%. The subsequent general elections (2019 and 2023) revealed the voters' turnout to be 34.75% and 25.01% with the total number of registered voters'

vis-à-vis total number of actual voters, respectively. These results suggest a reduction in the citizens' involvement in the voting process. This is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: The analysis of voter turnout relative to total number of registered voters in Nigeria (2015-2023)

S / N	Election Type	Estimated Population	Total No. of Registered Voters	Total No. of Actual Voters	Voter Turnout Rate (%)
1	2015 General Election	190,671,878	67,422,005	29,432,083	43.65%
2	2019 General Election	200,960,000	82,344,107	28,614,190	34.75%
3	2023 General Election	227,882,945	93,469,008	23,377,466	25.01%
	Total	619,514,823	243,235,120	81,423,739	

Source: Author (2025)

From Table 1 above, analysis shows that Nigeria voter turnout regarding the 2023 was the poorest compared to the 2015 and the 2019 general elections. The 2023 general election recorded the least level of voter turnout in Nigeria's election. Compare with small democratic states such as Rwanda and Guinea with voters' turnout of 98.2% and 98.4% in 2017 and 2022, respectively (Yiaga Africa Report, 2025). According to Dike (2023), the low level of citizens' turnout in the voting process, comparing the 2023 elections with that of 1983, asserts that "in the 1983 presidential elections which was won by Shehu Shagari before the coup toppled his administration, 25.4 million Nigerians participated in the election, a number that is still higher than the 2023 turnout" (p. 12). The Nigeria's population as at 1983 was 80 million (Dike, 2023), which was far from over 200 million of Nigerians in the year, 2023.

The historical trajectory of voter turnout in Nigeria has not been overwhelming and disappointing. This is because voter turnout has historically been low and remains a concern even recently. The table 2 below shows the general elections *vis-à-vis* the voter turnout from the second republic to the fourth republic.

Table 2: General election and voter turnout in Nigeria

General Election	Voter turnout
1979	34.6%
1983	38.9%
1993	35.0%
1999	52.3%
2003	69.1%
2007	57.5%
2011	53.7%
2015	43.7%
2019	34.7%
2023	25.1%

Source: Author (2025)

From the table above, the highest voter turnout in Nigeria's history was 69.1% in 2003 while 2023 experienced the least of voter turnout with 25.1%. The 2003 election was significant and

experienced high voter turnout because the citizens displayed enthusiasm and apparent commitment to the nascent democracy. It is also significant because it brought about an uninterrupted four-year civilian rule.

Following the 2003 elections, there has been a downward trend of voter turnout in Nigeria. The implication of this is that, of all the general elections in Nigeria, four out of ten general elections had more than 50% voter turnout. Apart from the 2003 general elections, minorities have been electing the political office holders in Nigeria. Therefore, the apathy displayed by the Nigerian citizens about voting or voter turnout might have happened because the voter register was not properly updated. A study has also confirmed a relationship between electoral fraud and voter turnout, and that an increase in electoral fraud will lead to a decrease in voter turnout (Oladipo, 2025). Therefore, electoral fraud might also be a factor responsible for apathy. An empirical study conducted by Ogbonna (2024) regarding poor voter turnout in the 2023 general elections revealed a number of factors responsible for this. According to him, the factors responsible for these are as follows:

- (i) The lack of confidence in the electoral process resulted in voters' apathy, that votes won't count,
- (ii) lack of confidence in the electoral umpire,
- (iii) lack of confidence in political leaders resulting from unfulfilled campaign promises,
- (iv) fear of electoral violence and insecurity, and
- (v) security of cash caused by the Central Bank of Nigeria's naira redesign a few months before the presidential election.

The introduction of technologies in the 2023 general election was intended to ensure public trust and promote electoral integrity; however, the 2023 general elections recorded a sharp decline in voter turnout. The figure indicated only a slight increase in 25 million of the 93 million registered voters who participated. Despite the adoption of election technologies which was intended to simplify the electoral process and boost voter interest, the anticipated influence has not been achieved (Yiaga Africa, 2025). The scope of this paper is between 2015 and 2023. The analysis depicts a downward trend in the voter turnout since 2019. The 2015 general elections had 43.7% while the subsequent voter turnout recorded 34.7% and 25.1% in 2019 and 2023, respectively. The implication of this persistent decline, according to Yiaga Africa (2025), is that voter turnout on Election Day presents a paradox that underscores significant challenges in converting voter registration into electoral participation. It is necessary to examine the implications of this on Nigeria's democratic governance. The implications of low participation for democratic governance in Nigeria are examined below.

First, low voter turnout portends a danger to Nigeria's democracy. It is a sign of democratic retrogression. The low voter turnout is a signal that Nigeria's democracy is not making progress and is not an enduring one. A feature of progressive or developed democracy is popular participation regarding voter turnout. The implication of this is that it might not last, and it might be reversed. Nigeria's 26 years of uninterrupted democracy is supposed to have experienced democratic stability and development, but it is still fragile. This is corroborated by Diamond (2015) that low voter turnout reflects "democratic ill health" or recession. The low voter turnout experienced in the 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections may even lead to democratic reversal in Nigeria.

Two, it erodes the legitimacy of government. In a democratic election, for elected officials to be recognised and bestowed legitimacy, a large number of citizens must be involved in the voting process. This indicates that those elected officials have the rightful authority to do so. Therefore, without a commensurate voter turnout, no election's outcome can reflect people's preferences. The percentage of votes received by a candidate or political party is important in setting the initial support for the government (Hassan, 2024). Nigeria's experience in 2015 and 2023 reflects insignificant percentages of voter turnout. For instance, less than 10% of Nigeria's electorate elected President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, which undermines his mandate. Therefore, when an

insignificant percentage of registered voters participate in elections, the legitimacy of the elected officials is questioned.

Three, it may weaken democratic institutions. The downward trends of voter turnout weaken democratic institutions. Democratic institutions are germane to the survival of democracy because they build democratic states. The institutions include the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the National Orientation Agency (NOA), etc. These institutions can be weakened by low voter turnout. For instance, INEC as the electoral body can be weakened due to persistent low voter turnout. This may erode the institution's democratic trust and undermine its effectiveness. The weakening will manifest in form of perceived bias or inefficiency of INEC, thus eroding trust and discouraging citizens from participating in the electoral process in subsequent elections.

Four, it may increase the influence of a special interest group. Here, the elected office holders may primarily serve the interest of those people who voted them and that the interests of some citizens are not as well served as those of others (Rosema, 2007). In other words, low voter turnout will make politicians with specific agenda to have more influence on the electoral process which can become a disadvantage to the general population. Democracy emphasises both the happiness of citizens and the distribution of the "public good." The "public good" is synonymous with the "general will" which is supposed to prioritize the overall well-being of citizens in the Nigerian state (Awopeju, 2025). The implication of low voter turnout may allow the public good to be compromised, making the interests of a small group to be prioritized over those of the broader public in Nigeria.

Five, it underscores the substance of representative democracy. Substance representative democracy emphasizes greater number of participations in the affairs of the state. The implication of having few citizens' participation or low level of voter turnout in an election is that elections will not be valued as a means to establish particular mass-elite linkages. For instance, the 2023 presidential election was won by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu with less than 10% of the total electorate, representing only 36.6% of the 24.97 million votes cast. This indicates a mere fraction of the 93.5 million registered voters which further reflects the disconnection between the citizens and the elite, thus undermining the value of elections as a means to establish strong mass-elite linkages in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has attempted to contribute to the ongoing debate on the fascinating aspects of ICT in the conduct of elections in Nigeria's democratic governance. The paper has examined the phenomena of elections, ICT and political participation in Nigeria with a view to examining the implications of deploying ICT in the conduct of elections and citizens' participation in democratic governance. The paper has established that while ICT plays a significant role in ensuring the credibility of elections, its deployment reflects the dwindling trends of voter participation in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023. It concludes that deployment of ICT in elections has brought a low level of voter turnout, thus having debilitating implications for democratic stability in Nigeria. In view of this, the imperative for democratic growth and sustenance relies on eliminating the barriers. Therefore, for Nigeria's democracy to be immune, the following policy recommendations are germane for implementation:

One, electorates have to be well enlightened about the importance of casting the votes and the use of ICT in elections. NOA, as a democratic institution of the state, should be able to enlighten citizens about both the importance of coming out to vote and the importance of democracy in Nigeria. Some of the citizens are yet to value democracy, and some are yet to accept democracy as their government in Nigeria.

Two, ensuring that citizens' votes count is a significant way for building their trust in elections.. This act gives the citizens the confidence to engage in the electioneering process, thus restoring public trust in Nigeria's democracy.

Three, the environments where elections take place should be secured by security personnel or agents. In other words, election security has to be heightened and guaranteed because Nigeria's elections have been characterised by violence and intimidation. If elections are well secured, the electorate will be free to cast their votes without fear and intimidation.

Four, the voter register needs to be updated from time to time. The update is necessary to really know the actual number of voters. The names of some persons who are no longer in existence need to be filtered so that the actual number of voters will be ascertained.

Five, the Nigerian government should make voting compulsory for all eligible voters. In other words, there should be a legal framework that enforces compulsory voting. The Nigerian government needs to learn lessons from states where voting is made compulsory so that a significant number of Nigerian citizens will participate in the affairs of the state.

Six, the use of ICT should be well encouraged and well deployed in the subsequent elections. Human ingenuity that can tamper with the electoral results should be taken care of. Besides, glitches associated with the ICT in the conduct of elections should be avoided so that the citizens will have confidence in the use of ICT for electoral integrity so as to make elections credible.

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