

Interrogating The Contradictions of Secret and Optional Balloting In A Multi-party Democratic System: *A Path to Reform*

Aliyu Ozovehe Ilias

Department of Political Science and International Relations
University of Abuja, Abuja.
Ilias4512@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper interrogates the problems of secret balloting and optional balloting in a multiparty democracy and the way forward. The effort is to resolve whether the absurdities arising from secret balling and optional balloting in a multiparty Democracy have affected multiparty democracy in Nigeria. The secondary method of data collection was used in order to explain the topic. The explanatory design was employed in order to achieve vivid analysis with the view of easing assimilation. The Elite Theory was used as a theoretical framework and the essence of this is that balloting in a multiparty democracy in Nigeria is very elitist. There is no gain in stating the obvious that there are challenges facing secret and optional balloting in a multiparty democracy. It is based on these challenges that this paper is suggesting that balloting in Nigeria should be done electronically to avoid the menace that comes with secret and optional balloting in Nigeria.

Keywords; Election, Balloting, Secret Balloting, Optional Balloting and Multiparty Democracy

Introduction

Countries all over the world have decided to embrace Democracy, not because of it's names but because Democracy globally has been seen as the best form of government because it gives the people the will and right to determine those who lead them. Democracy currently has become the most popular and most sought-after form of government globally. A number of contemporary leaders yearn to be seen as democrats just as many regimes seek to be described as democratic.

Democracy strongly appeals to the ordinary people, Nigeria over the last twenty-four years has been practicing Democracy as a form of government but the type of democracy is participatory democracy that is defined by periodic election(s).

Election is one of the most important pillars of Democracy because it is a process that is legitimate in the recruitment of individuals into the public service of a country, Nigeria, for instance conducts its elections every four years to recruit political leaders into the presidency, the National Assembly, the State Governorship, the State House of Assembly. The elections also include the Local Government, the State Houses of Assembly, the Local Government Chairmanship and Councillorship. The importance attached to elections in Nigeria has led to the declaration of national public holiday(s) to conduct such elections on such dates declared by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Elections are one of the features that make multiparty democracy, formidable. However, the 2023 General Election did not come without its challenges considering the perception of the electorates about its credibility.

The Nigerian Electoral Act of 2020 stipulates that Nigeria is to practice Party Democracy, which implies that any candidate that put itself forward for any electoral office must be

sponsored by a political party. This is so because, the law maintains that the victory of any candidate is a victory for the political party that sponsored him, thereby making election(s) mandatory for leadership recruitment especially in Nigeria's current 4th Republic that began in 1999.

Statement of the Problem

Multiparty electoral systems are usually the recommended for heterogeneous populations. States such as the United States of America, Germany, India, South Africa, Italy and Brazil have multiparty electoral systems. These systems have been well managed as they have severally conducted credible elections. The United States for instance has been conducting multiparty elections for more than 180 years and has developed effective electoral efficiency. This is not the situation for countries such as Nigeria as the electoral process is usually chaotic and plagued with violent conflict. It is from this premise that this research receives impetus. To this end, the following objectives are indicated.

Objectives of the Paper

The purpose for which this paper is carried out is to;

- i. Examine the absurdities in secret and optional balloting in a multiparty democracy in Nigeria.
- ii. Examine how these absurdities have affected multiparty democracy in Nigeria

Methodology

The Descriptive Survey was used in this paper, the essence of this was to enable the analysis to be achieved based on the stated objective. The secondary source of data collection was adopted by this paper, these include published textbooks, journals, bulletins and unpublished documents.

Theoretical Analysis

In any democracy, there exists Democratic elitism, and democratic elitism accepts that the main premise of Elite Theory asserts that, "No societies are governed by the people, by a majority; all societies including societies called democratic, are ruled by a minority; all societies including societies called democratic, are ruled by the minority in any societies". Burnham (1943:112). The Elite Theory considers inequality as the outcome of power distribution, which in turn reports on other resources such as economic and organizational assets. Historically, Nigerian Elites have been a faulty bourgeoisie in the sense that social position, economic pre-eminence and even values determinism are by the elites

The Elite Theory posits that a small minority, consisting of members of the economic elite and policy planning network always determine the voting pattern in every election in Nigeria through the Electoral Management body just to hold on to power and this access to power is most often ~~are~~ used to continually amass state wealth for themselves at the detriment of development, (Tyoden 2014:56).

The history of Political Elitism can be traced to Plato's classification of the ruling class in the Republic. In the words of Plato, the ruling class in society are the people who are trained in various arts of leadership to guard the society, this ruling class constitute the rational elements of the society. In the words of Plato and they are the soldiers who have the spirited efforts or elements, an ideal society will be one in which all these elements function harmoniously, but in Nigeria the reverse is the case, due to the over bearing interest of political "godfathers" "godmothers" and "commercial or mercantilist politicians" who sees politics and elections as an investment rather than a call to secure and in a multiparty system this is a direct invitation to anti-democratic forces against development and nation building, Iyekepolo, (2020:64).

Wader and Akpan (2011:125). Election can also be seen as a process under democracy through which people or citizens exercise their freedom and inalienable right to organize their life and choose those whom they delegate their rights as representatives, Adeniyi (2011:26).

The Implication of Elite Theory on Nigeria's Multi-Party Electoral System

The Nigerian political elites are also called, Power Elites (Mills 1956). They are a conglomeration of individuals who occupy specific government positions across Nigeria, and include the President, Vice President, State Governors and their Deputies, Federal and State legislators, Judges senior officers of the Judiciary, senior military officers, senior officers of the Police, Party Leaders, Members of Council of State, Federal Ministers and State Commissioners, Chairmen of the Boards of Statutory Agencies of Government, Captains of Industry, and Chairmen and Councilors of Local Government Areas.

These persons control the state using the instrument of government to determine their objectives especially the electoral system and the processes to be used in determining how ballot is to be printed and used. They achieve this by, masterminding a lot of intrigues and manipulations to achieve what system of balloting to be deployed in Nigeria's elections. They also mediate using the legislature to create a loophole

The implication of these manipulations and intrigues by Nigerian Elites is that it has negatively affected the functioning of the Nigerian state, so much that Nigeria, now has "strongmen and weak institution. Again, Nigerian elites have through their activities turned Nigeria into a fragile state.

Conceptual Clarifications

- i. **Election;** This refers to the procedure by which the members of an organization and/or a governmental jurisdiction such as a state or nation, select a person or people to hold offices of authority. An election may also be registered choices between alternate courses of action and it may be conducted by ballot, by a show of hands or by oral voting.
- ii. **Balloting:** This is the act or process of choosing a candidate to represent the people of a given country in the parliament, the executive and possibly into other arms of government through the casting of a ballot to that particular candidate as stipulated by the constitution of that country or through an act of the National Assembly, for example, ballots are cast for the President, Members of the National Assembly, Governor, and Members of the State Houses of Assembly Dibia (2008:112).
- iii. **Democracy:** Democracy is defined as a form of government where people exercise their political power directly or indirectly in choosing those who want to represent them. In Nigeria, democracy has several connotations, to some, democracy entails election, why to others, democracy is a situation where the minority have their say and majority have their way (Menzie's 1943). As used in this paper, democracy is an expression of sentiment towards leadership recruitment in various public office for the purpose of achieving development Dibia. (2008:12).
- iv. **Secret Balloting:** This refers to balloting where electorates cast their vote secretly to the candidate or party of their choice. It is also a process by which an electorate is allowed to take a decision or express the sentiment or preference of a particular candidate through a concealed ballot in Nigeria. Secret Balloting is a situation where the electorate picks the ballot paper, goes behind a cubicle to thumbprint a candidate of his choice and folds the ballot paper neatly and drops it in the ballot box for the Electoral Official to see with other party agents and security personnel as witness, (Dibia 2008; 113).
- v. **Open Balloting:** This refers to voting that is done openly or publicly. The voters line up according to their political parties and the counting of the voters is done by the presiding officer before everybody is present. The results are declared on the spot.
- vi. **Multiparty Democracy:** Multiparty Democracy is a form of party democracy that is defined by the presence of more than two political parties been operated by a political system. It is a democratic system with more than two political parties contesting for political power in Nigeria. In Nigeria's Fourth Republic between 1999-2003 there where PDP, APP, NCP, and A.G e.t.c between 2003-2007, there where PDP, ANPP, APGA, PAC, e.t.c between 2007-2011, there where PDP, APGA, ACN, ADC e.t.c, between 2011-2015, there where CAN, PDP, CPC, UPGA e.t.c and 2015-2019 there where PDA,

APGA, APC, PDP e.t.c and between 2019-2023 there where APC, L.P, ADC, PDP. Though having adjust the political party by INEC we now have eighteen political party now in the 2024.

Requirements for Credible Elections In Nigeria.

The major requirements that guide credible elections are;

- i. **Free Elections;** Free elections are one of the requirements for a credible election and this is when the electorate has the right to choose from several candidates or parties that can run for the election without any restrictions, the electorate must also be allowed to be free to decide whether they want to use their right to vote or abstain from doing so, if they like. Mutuillah, (2015; 74). Among the most important principles of democratic governance is the principle of participation, which is however missing in Nigerian context. While Muhammad (2014:38-9)
- ii. **Equitability;** Election should be equitable when each electorate who can use his/her right to the ballot has at his disposal to vote and when neither his origin nor his sex, language, norms, or possession, job, class, sexual identity, training, religion and or political convictions have an influence on whatever kind of assessment of the electoral process. Multiullah, (2015:74).
- iii. **Secrecy in Balloting;** In an election, there must be no way of knowing for which political party or for which particular candidate a citizen has voted. They are then secret, when each citizen can put his ballot in an envelope, without ~~having~~ been either watched over or influenced. In the secrecy of the polling booth, and when he is also able, in the same way; to put his envelope inside the ballot box afterwards, Mutiullah (2015:75).
- iv. **Transparency;** Democratic elections should be public and transparent, which means that citizens have the right to vote and monitor the counting of the votes when the ballot box is opened. This entails that is possible to completely follow the process of voting, vote starts from the collection of ballot paper to the insertion into the ballot box till the final counting is undertaken to establish the circulation that will eventually share out the result. Mutiullaht, (2015:75).
- v. **Access to Electoral Information:** Here, it is important to conduct elections on regular basis. In this situation, the electorate is made aware of the date of the coming elections and prepares ahead. It is a way to make sure that the current government is defined within a time frame and that its people have the right to remove it from office. The electorate represents the entire population due to the fact that they are the major player in any election. Mutiullah, (2015:76).

Nigeria's Electoral Ballotting Experience

The absurdities bedeviling secret and optional balloting in multiparty democracy can be viewed from two perspectives. First is those absurdities associated with secret balloting and the second is that of optional balloting.

The problems associated with Secret Balloting are;

- a. **Very Tedious to Operate:** One fundamental flaws against secret balloting is the difficulty in operating it. The Nigerian Electoral Act of 2022 makes it mandatory to be at the polling Centre on till 2 p.m. after which such electorate will not be allowed to vote on the other hand, the candidate needs to be confirmed electronically, which takes time unnecessarily too long which makes the balloting process too cumbersome and the implication of this is that a lot of electorates were disenfranchised due to the operation of the secret ballot system caused by the electoral laws.
- b. **Not meant for Illiterate Population:** The secret balloting is one of the most cumbersome methods of balloting and due to its comprehensiveness, the Nigerian Electorate find it difficult to cope with, due to their low level of literacy and this has made a lot of their votes to be rendered invalid due to voting on a ballot paper. This may not necessarily be

- due to their carelessness but rather the poor understanding of the secret balloting system.
- c. **Time Consuming:** Due to the several rules; procedures and guidelines set by electoral umpires a lot of time is consumed trying to implement all these. In Nigerian Elections, you have to be at the polling station from 8am for first accreditation and after that you submit yourself as an electorate for the casting of ballot, in between this time, a lot of time is wasted and this to several electorate is a “turn down” for them to cast their ballot, that is why in the 2003 General Election there where situation where for example 300 people were registered, 200 accredited to vote while 97 casted their vote, reason is due to time wasting factor. Oluwatomi and Ibonye (2020; 182).
 - d. **Very expensive to operate:** No doubt one of the most expensive balloting methods is the secret balloting method, to ensure secrecy a lot of money is spent on the printing of ballot boxes, papers and other stationery materials, the construction of cubicles for ballot casting and these requirements are expensive and this is the reason that Democracy is regarded as too expensive.

Problems associated with optional balloting include;

- i. **Voters Coercion;** This is one of the contradictions against optional balloting because the electorate is coerced to cast ballot for a particular candidate whose pressure he cannot resist, such pressure can come by way of intimidation, threat to life or maiming.
- ii. **Voter Intimation and Harassment:** Optional balloting creates room for intimidation and harassment of the electorate as physical, mental and economic intimidation and harassment can occur to make the electorate vote against their conscience.
- iii. **Pressure from Government:** Due to the power of incumbency optional balloting is a hazardous method of balloting and the government in power, that is, desirous of retaining power can pressurize the electorate to cast their ballot for the government preferred candidate.
- iv. **Instigation of Violence:** This is one of the products of optional balloting as those not satisfied with the outcome of the process and result, may go on rampage and cause destruction of lives and property in reaction to the process, thereby increasing the incidence of electoral violence, Andrew (2017;221).
- v. **Electoral Results Manipulation:** One of the norms of election is credibility. Optional balloting however creates opportunities for manipulation of results by Electoral Officials, the choice of the electorate can be manipulated by the declaration of false results.

Consequences of Secret and Optional Balloting to Nigeria’s Multiparty System.

Secret Balloting and optional balloting have its advantage, but its elements have outweighed its relevance. Over the years, secret balloting has dominated Nigeria’s multiparty system of the Fourth Republic and featured prominently in the Nigeria’s Third Republic under the two-Party System. During previous republics, the optional balloting method has shown itself as an electoral method that have created more complications to the Nigerian electoral process. In consequence to the poor execution of the secret and optional balloting methods used Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, it has led to voter apathy as elaborated by the following;

- a. **Perceived absence of Majority Will:** The electoral will of the majority in a multiparty system is not negotiable hence secret and optional balloting methods are regarded with suspicion, because majority of the electorate are aware of its being prone to manipulation.
- b. **Illegitimacy:** One of the consequences of secret and optional balloting is the non-acceptability of whoever emerges through secret and optional balloting in a multiparty system. Nigeria’s electoral system prescribes simple majority returns. This connotes that the announced winner may in reality have had more people vote against him than for him reinforcing the issue of legitimacy.
- c. **Lack of Accountability and Transparency:** Most of electioneering process are not understood by people, the polling booth was rearranged during the 2023 general election,

most electorate did not know their venue until they went to the usual place and has to be looking for their names at different polling booth, this discourages a lot of voters

Conclusion

Democracy is one of the forms of government that promote development and Nation buildings, but this cannot come to fruition without recruitment of leadership that will make this happen, however, one of the most credible methods for this recruitment to take place is through an election. In Nigeria the method of Election has always been through secret balloting on one hand and optional balloting on the other hand. These two methods have no doubt been used to recruit leadership into various public office positions, but has Democracy in Nigeria continues to grow? it becomes necessary to interrogate the essence or absurdities that has bedeviled both methods that so much Nigeria election has not been able to achieve 50% of it voter's strength since 1999 to date, even with the evidence of large turnout of voters particular in the 2015 and 2023 general elections due to this challenges.

Recommendations

- i. The Nigerian Election system should change from the current secret and optional balloting method and adopt the Modified Open Optional and Secret Ballot System (MOOSEBS). The essence of this is to allow political parties get fully involved in Pre-Election, Election and Post-Election activities because recruitment through the suggested process will improve electoral awareness, legitimacy and credibility of the electoral outcomes.
- ii. The Electronic Voters System (EVS) should be introduced and legitimized to restore credibility in the Nigerian electoral process and democratic system. For the purpose of ensuring credibility, voting should begin from a year into the swearing in, through electronic voting for the purpose of not tying down the country because of Elections.

References

- Odah, A.O and Lanre, O.N. (2022) eds; Nigeria, Issues in Economy, Politics and Society Dakar -Fanin, Senegal; The Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung.
- Mutiullah, A.O (2015); Reflection of Nigerian Politics, Ibadan, Motoso Publishers
- Tyoden, S.G (2014); "(Eds.)", Legislators and the legislature A Guide for Legislators in Nigeria, Kuru; The National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies.
- Ezdeajughu, M.C (2021); Presidential Election in Nigeria, Selection or Election; Sapientia Global Journey of Arts and Humanities.
- Oluwatomi, A and Ibonye, V. (2020); Nigeria and Multilateral Development Agencies; In perspective on contemporary, Nigerian Politics and International Relations, "(Eds.)" by Tar U, Wapmuk S, and Ubi E.K.
- Andrew, J. (2017); The World in; Understanding the Word's Trouble Spots; London; the Economics, 2019-237
- Dibble, C.C (2018); Essential Government for Senior Secondary School Lagos, Tonad Publishers.
- Wader, M. and Akpan P. (2011); Election monitoring in Nigeria; the Collaborative Role of Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps and Other security Agencies 2003-2011" in "conducting Peaceful, free and fair election in 2011 and beyond" Abuja; Chartered Graphic Press.
- Adeniji, A.S (2011); "Conducting credible peaceful, Free and Fair election in Nigeria in 2011; the role of Independent National Electoral Commission (NEC)" In, conducting Peaceful, Free and Fair Election in 2011 and Beyond" Abuja Charted Graphic Press.
- Larry, D. (2015); Facing up to the Democratic Recession, Journal of Democracy, 26; 1:141-155
- Ikelegbe, A. O. (2013). Politics and governance in Nigeria: Perspectives, issues, and cases. Benin: Centre for Population and Environmental Development.
- Schenkkan, N. and Repucci, (2019); The freedom House, survey for 2018; Democracy in Retreat, Journal of Democracy 30, 2:100-14.

- Adetula, V and Adeyi E. V. (2014); Money, Parties and Democracy. In Obafemi O. Egwu. S. Ibeam O. and Ibrahim J. (Eds); Political Parties and Democracy in Nigeria; Abuja INEC CDD, NPSA and NIPSS supported by (DGD) II Project.
- Zoaka, Y.A (2020); The Quest for Proportional Representation in Nigeria, in Odah, A.O and Lanre O.N (Eds.); Nigeria; issues in Economy, politics and Society, Rosa Luxembourg stiftung.
- Muhammad, H. (2014): Popular Participation for Sustainable National Democratic Development, Bello, S. and Yusuf, M.M (Ed), in Popular Participation and Democratization in Nigeria under the Fourth Republic, Africa Research and Development Agency (ARADA). Ahmadu Bello University Press Limited, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria,