

THE ELECTORAL HUB EXPECTATIONS ON THE ONGOING CONTINUOUS VOTER REGISTRATION

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About The Electoral Hub

The Electoral Hub an organ of the Initiative for Research, Innovation and Advocacy in Development (IRIAD), is a multidisciplinary strategic think-tank which seeks to provide solutions to improve the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. It is conceptualised to complement the roles and activities of the different institutions, stakeholders and drivers of the electoral process and governance. The Electoral Hub's aim is to strengthen electoral governance and accountability in Nigeria through the provision of data and critical analysis supporting the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. We believe that the integrity of the electoral process is crucial in improving the electoral governance architecture and democracy in Nigeria. We also believe in contextual analysis for solutions rooted in the principles of justice and equity.

Our core values are knowledge-exchange, inclusion, justice, equity, transparency and accountability.

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ACRONYMS

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019

CSOs: Civil Society Organisations

CVR: Continuous Voter Registration

EMB: Electoral Management Body

ICCES: Inter-Agency Consultative Committee for Election Security

INEC: Independent National Electoral Commission

IRIAD: Initiative for Research, Innovation and Advocacy in Development

PVC: Permanent Voters Card

PWDs: Persons with Disabilities

TVC: Temporary Voters Card

INTRODUCTION

Voter registration can be defined simply as "the key process that establishes which individuals are eligible to vote".[1] It is a key stage in the pre-election period, as it ensures that eligible citizens have a real opportunity to vote, and prevents ineligible people from voting and multiple voting.[2] For voter registration to be effective, it must be in line with the principles of inclusion, equality, and transparency. This means that all eligible citizens must be given free and equal access to the registration process, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, disability status, religion, socio-economic background, or other identities status. It also means that the information on where, when, and how to register to vote must be disseminated widely by the Electoral Management Body (EMB). The quality of the voter registration process will ultimately affect the legitimacy and credibility of the elections conducted using that voters register.

In light of INEC's resumption of continuous voter registration (CVR), which was earlier suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, The Electoral Hub, an organ of the Initiative for Research, Innovation and Advocacy in Development (IRIAD), has developed this paper to explain the process of voter registration in Nigeria and outline our expectations on the CVR exercise. These expectations are aimed at ensuring that CVR is conducted at the highest standard and, in turn, the integrity and credibility of our electoral process is safeguarded.

[1]Open Election Data Initiative, Voter Registration, https://openelectiondata.net/en/guide/key-categories/voter-registration
[2]Ibid

VOTER REGISTRATION IN NIGERIA

Nigeria operates an active voter registration system. This means that eligible citizens are not automatically registered once they are of voting age. Rather, they must take active steps and go through a registration process before their names appear on the voters register. The body responsible for voter registration in Nigeria is the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). INEC is mandated by the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria to "arrange and conduct the registration of persons qualified to vote and prepare, maintain and revise the register of voters for the purpose of any election". [3]The 2010 Electoral Act (as amended) also mandates the Commission to carry out continuous voter registration nationwide.[4]

During CVR, INEC carries out three main activities: fresh registration of new voters, transfer of existing voters, and distribution of Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs).[5] At the point of physical registration, registrants are issued Temporary Voters Cards (TVCs), while the PVCs of the registrants will be collected at a later date.

TO BE ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE IN CVR, A PERSON MUST MEET THE FOLLOWING REQUIREMENTS:

- Is a citizen of Nigeria;
- Has attained the age of 18 years, on or before the registration day;
- Is resident, works in, or originates from the LGA/Area Council or RA/Ward covered by the Registration Area Centre;
- Is resident, works in, or originates from the LGA/Area Council or RA/Ward covered by the Registration Area Centre;
- Is not subject to any legal incapacity to vote under any law, rules or regulationsin force in Nigeria;

[3]Paragraph 15(e), Part 1 to the Third Schedule of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria
[4]INEC, Nationwide Continuous Voter Registration Exercise, https://www.inecnigeria.org/news-all/nationwide-continuous-voter-registration-exercise/
[5]Ibid

- Presents himself/herself to the CVR officers for registration and is able to provide proof of identity, age and nationality, if requested;
- Has registered before but his/her name/photograph/fingerprints were not captured; such a person must provide his/her Temporary Voters Card (TVC); and
- Has PVC or TVC but his/her name is not on the Register of Voters.

As the name implies, CVR is conducted on a continuous basis by INEC, throughout the electoral cycle rather than just before a general election. Although the COVID-19 pandemic led to the prior suspension of CVR, INEC later resumed CVR. Unlike in previous years, INEC innovatively began the CVR exercise virtually on 28 June 2021 through the cvr.inecnigeria.org platform which allowed citizens to pre-register and provide/update their details. 48 hours after the platform was launched, INEC revealed that it had recorded almost 100,000 online registrants,[6] and a month later this figure had increased to over a million. [7]Physical registration, biometrics, and distribution of PVCs commenced in Lagos State on 25 July 2021,[8] and nationwide on 28 July 2021.[9] Against this context of CVR resumption, The Electoral Hub has some expectations, as discussed below.

[6]William Ukpe, "Voter registration: INEC receives 92,845 online applications within 48 hours", Nairametrics (1 July 2021), https://nairametrics.com/2021/07/01/voter-registration-inec-receives-92845-online-applications-within-48-hours/

[7]Samson Adenekan, "Voter Registration: INEC records one million PVC registrants in four weeks", Premium Times (26 July 2021), https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/475809-voter-registration-inec-records-one-million-pvc-registrants-in-four-weeks.html

[8]Olayinka Ajayi, "Continuous Voter Registration: INEC begins physical biometric capturing", Vanguard https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/07/continuous-voter-registration-inec-begins-physical-biometric-capturing/

[9]"Continuous Voters Registration: INEC to deploy 5,346 personnel to 2,346 centres nationwide", Premium Times (21 July 2021), https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/469227-continuous-voters-registration-inec-to-deploy-5346-personnel-to-2346-centres-nationwi-de.html

EXPECTATIONS ON CVR

Given the importance of voter registration in the electoral process, it is imperative that INEC conducts CVR to the highest standard. The Electoral Hub has seven key expectations as INEC resumes CVR. These expectations are mostly of INEC, but will also be of other stakeholders such as the media, civil society organisations (CSOs), security agencies, and the general public.

01 INCLUSIVITY

Firstly, we expect that the CVR exercise will be inclusive. One of INEC's guiding principles is that CVR will be inclusive, which means that the "Register of Voters must include as many eligible citizens as possible and registration centres must be accessible to all qualified persons".[10] To fulfil this duty, we expect that INEC will attend to everyone and treat them fairly, regardless of their gender, socio-economic background, geography, religion, political affiliation, disability status, and so on. We also expect that INEC will make special adjustments to allow specific groups of people to register and collect their PVCs. For persons with disabilities (PWDs), INEC can facilitate access by providing rails and ramps, sign language interpreters, signage posters, and so on in registration centres. For farmers in rural areas, INEC can allocate different times for them to register/collect their PVCs when they get back from the farm. For women who practise purdah, they should also be accommodated by allowing them register at different times from the men in their communities.

On the part of the public, we also expect that Nigerians, especially minority groups such as women, youth and PWDs, will participate in the process. We are pleased that as much as 73.5% of online registrants were youth aged 18-34.[11] To further encourage youth participation, The Electoral Hub has conducted political education for over 300 youth and we are about to commence even more trainings for youth over the coming months. We encourage other CSOs to conduct similar trainings for other minority groups. It is our hope that our efforts, combined with those of other stakeholders, will drive the interest of Nigerians across different groups to not just register but also vote on election day.

[10]INEC, Nationwide Continuous Voter Registration Exercise, op. cit.
[11]Samson Adenekan, "Voter Registration: INEC records one million PVC registrants in four weeks", op. cit.

02 COLLECTION OF PVCS

Secondly, we expect that Nigerians will not stop at registering to vote but also go on to collect their PVCs. As discussed earlier, registrants are given TVCs upon registration, while PVCs are collected at a later date. Without a PVC, a person cannot vote. It is therefore essential that Nigerians take the further step of collecting their PVCs after registration. During the 2019 elections, over 11 million PVCs were uncollected,[12] which means that those people were automatically unable to vote. During this electoral cycle, we expect to see more Nigerians collecting their PVCs after registering so that they can vote during elections.

03 LOGISTICS

Thirdly, we expect that INEC will put in place effective logistics measures to save time and ensure that long waiting times or failure of devices do not serve as a disincentive for participation. We applaud INEC for the online registration portal, which should help to reduce queues and waiting times. We further encourage it to ensure that all devices needed for biometrics, printing of TVCs, and so on are working properly. This will ensure that the process is conducted swiftly and more people are encouraged to register.

04 SECURITY

We expect that the CVR exercise will be smooth and peaceful. This implies that Nigerians conduct themselves properly and in an orderly manner. On the part of INEC, it also implies that they collaborate with security agencies through the platform of the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee for Election Security (ICCES) to ensure the safety of voters and election workers during the voter registration exercise. Given the insecurity situation in the country, it is paramount to allay people's fears about violence during CVR and assure them that they will be duly protected.

[12]"BREAKING: 72.8 Million Nigerians Collected PVCs, Says INEC", Sahara Reporters (21 February 2019), http://saharareporters.com/2019/02/21/breaking-728-million-nigerians-collected-pvcs-says-inec

05 TRANSPARENCY

We also expect that the process will be transparent. This implies that every information about CVR is publicised, so that those who are interested in the process will have as much information as possible at their disposal. Here, INEC can collaborate with CSOs and the media to widen reach. A key part of this involves also sharing disaggregated data on the voters register at regular intervals. Furthermore, transparency implies that the CVR process should be open and accessible to domestic and international observers, party agents, and the media. This is also a guiding principle stated on INEC's website,[13] and we expect that they will be complied with.

06 COVID-19 COMPLIANCE

Furthermore, we expect that the exercise will be done in line with COVID-19 protocols such as wearing of masks, social distancing, and the use of sanitisers. This implies that Nigerians comply with the protocols and INEC workers enforce them. Some enforcement mechanisms include ensuring that only people wearing face masks are allowed to register, operating a two-tier queuing system to allow for social distancing, ensuring that each person sanitises their hands before and after thumb-printing, and disinfecting the thumb-printing machine after each person uses it.

07 FOLLOW-UP MEASURES

Importantly, follow-up measures should also be taken to ensure that as many registered voters as possible actually vote during elections. After all, the end goal is not voter registration; voter registration is simply a means to the end of voting during elections. We must therefore avoid a repeat of the 2019 general elections where out of over 80 million registered voters, only less than 30 million (about 35%) actually turned up to vote.[14] To do this, INEC, CSOs and the media must constantly put out messages encouraging people not just to register to vote, but to actually vote during the elections. This should drive up voter turnout and participation during upcoming elections.

[13]INEC, Nationwide Continuous Voter Registration Exercise, op. cit.
[14]INEC, Declaration of Results (23 February 2019), https://www.inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019-GE-PRESIDENTIAL-ELECTION-RESULTS.pdf

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on voter registration, based on the recognition that the levels of voter turnout and participation in elections are dependent on the level of participation in the CVR exercise. If a large number of people do not register to vote, then they will not be able to vote during elections. Ultimately, a smooth and inclusive CVR process requires action from different stakeholders. We commend INEC for their innovation in allowing people to pre-register online, and we encourage INEC to go further by ensuring that the CVR process is inclusive, smooth, transparent, and in line with COVID-19 protocols. Security agencies must ensure that the areas where CVR is conducted are secure. CSOs and the media must complement INEC's efforts by publicising information about CVR and encouraging Nigerian citizens to not just register to vote but actually vote during elections. The Electoral Hub strongly urges Nigerians to recognise the power of their vote, participate in the voter registration process, collect their PVCs, and come out to vote in their numbers during elections. In this way, we are confident that the principles of participation, inclusion, and representation that are key to electoral governance will be upheld.



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