



Research Paper

# Not too young to run act, youth participation and party nomination forms in Nigeria (2015–2023)

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**Abstract:** This study examines the political engagement of Nigerian youths from 2015 to 2023, focusing on the Not Too Young to Run Act, the activities of political parties, and the constraining factors of the nomination forms. Regardless of the passage of the Not Too Young to Run legislation in 2018, which constitutionally capped the age limit of candidacy for elections, there was still disproportionate youth participation in Nigerian politics. This study analyses the crucial impact of social movements and digital activism on civic participation exemplified by the campaigns #NotTooYoungToRun and #EndSARS. Theoretically, this study adopted three theories: political participation theory, social movement theory and elite theory as a theoretical foundation. The methodology was qualitative and relied on secondary sources of data which were thematically analysed. The study adopts three theories: political participation theory, social movement theory and elite theory as a theoretical foundation. This study discovered that the systematic political and socio-economic structures are some of the limiting factors that stifled youthful political participation in Nigeria, especially between 2015 and 2023. The study discovered that the systematic political and socio-economic structures are some of the limiting factors that stifled youthful political participation in Nigeria, especially between 2015 and 2023. Prominent among them is the exorbitant political party nomination form. This finding highlights how the financial barriers imposed by political parties can effectively exclude young people from the political process, thereby limiting their ability to engage in governance. Such practices not only hinder youth participation but also perpetuate a cycle of political disengagement and inequality. The conclusion of the work has focused on policy recommendations designed to elevate participation through empowering policies and reforms, internal intra-party democracy, economic participation, and technology. This inclusion is vital for fostering a more representative and responsive governance system that addresses the unique needs and aspirations of the younger generation.

**Keywords:** Not Too Young, Political Party, Party Nomination, Social Movement, and Youth.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa, has a dynamic and youth-dominated population whereby a population of over 60% of the population aged below the age of 30 exists in the country (Abiodun, 2020). Despite the sheer numbers of the Nigerian youths, they have persistently remained outside the circles of political leadership. They only played a role in the political system of the country as voters, campaign organizers, and the occasional protesters, but not as office holders. The youth bulge paradox and lack of representation in the political process reveal the deep-rooted systemic, institutional, and cultural barriers which have pushed youths aside and denied them representation in the country's formal institutions.

Expressing his opinion, Amadi (2021) submits that under-representation of youths in governance has caused concern for a long time for academics, the civil society, and pro-democracy activists. In response to the challenge of under-representation of the youth in governance, the "Not Too Young to Run" campaign was launched in 2016 as the first youth-driven campaign to end the constitutional prohibitions of the age to contest for elective offices in Nigeria. This was organised by the Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth & Advancement (YIAGA Africa), in conjunction with a network of actors in civil society as well as international supporters. The campaign sought to reform some provisions of the 1999 Constitution to accommodate youth active involvement in politics. These provisions eventually reduced the age for an individual to qualify for candidacy and contest for the House of Representatives, Senate, and the State Houses of Assembly as well as the presidency. The campaign succeeded in getting the Not Too Young to Run Act signed into law in May of 2018 by President Muhammadu Buhari as a historic victory in the evolution of Nigeria's democracy (Adeboye, 2020).

Despite the euphoria with which the NTYTR Act was welcomed as a legislative milestone majorly among youths, Isiaka (2023) contends that its implementation exposed the political and institutional bottlenecks which militated against the participation and involvement of young Nigerians in the democratic and governance process. Prominent among these clogs is the outrageous high party nomination and expression of interest form fee that has served as very effective dissuasive to would-be young politicians. According to Roberts (2019), Nigeria's political parties, and the two major ones in particular, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), have continued to charge outlandish amounts for potential contestants to buy their nomination and expression of interest forms, effectively monetarising the electoral process. The economic barrier disproportionately affects the youth, the majority of whom do not have the economic muscle and political influence to play the game.

Succinctly, responding to the argument of Roberts (2019), Ajaegbu and Israel (2023) submit that between 2015 and 2023, the Nigerian electoral cycle witnessed a major upsurge in youth political activism, driven by the Not Too Young To Run (NTYTR) movement, the #EndSARS protests, and the growing strength of online activism. Ironically, the youth activism failed to translate into electoral success despite the fact that more youths indicated their readiness to contest elections, particularly the 2019 and 2023 elections. However, most of them were not able to secure party tickets because of the cost of party nomination and candidate selection procedures (Isiaka, 2023). This fact provokes important questions regarding the genuineness of political parties in pursuing youth representation and the success of legal reforms against deep-rooted political culture.

Flowing from the arguments and submissions above, the crux of this paper is a critical assessment of the relationship between the Not Too Young to Run law, youth participation in party nominations, and party nomination form fees in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. It interrogates critically the extent reform of the law has translated into concrete political advancements for the Nigerian youth and evaluates the institutional barriers to their political expression. The study also explores the broader consequences of democratic consolidation in Nigeria, such as how the exclusion or inclusion of the youth in the government drives the country's development, policy agenda setting, and management. Through an exploration of these issues, this paper contributes to the literature on youth political empowerment in Africa's largest democracy with evidence-based opinion and policy interventions aimed at achieving more representative government and democratic accountability.

In order to appraise the issues raised, the paper is discussed in six parts. The first part introduces and problematises the issue under discourse. The second part reviewed concepts and the genesis of the Not Too Young To Run Movement. This is followed by the third section, which is the theoretical framework. The methodology of this paper becomes the fourth section. The fifth section focuses on youth participation in elections in Nigeria (2015–2023), which encapsulates discourse on the Not Too Young To Run Movement, youth participation and party nomination forms in Nigeria (2015–2023). The last section of this study is the conclusion and recommendations.

## 2 | CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE ON YOUTH AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

### 2.1 | Conceptualising Youth in Nigeria

Youth is the time of life when one is young and often means the time between childhood and adulthood/maturity (Bello, 2019 cited in Ajaegbu and Israel, 2023). The United Nation defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24. Under the 15-24 definition that characterises a youth, introduced in 1981, children are defined as those under the age of 14 while under the 1979 Convention on the Rights of the Child, those under the age of 18 are regarded as children. According to the African Youth Charter, youth is seen as an individual between the ages of 15 to 35. A youth is an individual going through transformation from childhood to adulthood, usually between the ages of 15 and 35 years. Youth in Nigeria includes all members of the Federal Republic of Nigeria aged 18-35. Youth as a concept varies from culture to culture and society to society. According to the current National Youth Policy in Nigeria, 'the youth shall comprise of all young males and females aged between 18 and 35 years who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria'. While it is true that this definition is broad, it is understood that this is a time in life when most young people are going through dramatic changes in their lives as they move from a stage of childhood into adulthood. Furthermore, the National Youth Policy (NYP) in Nigeria stipulated some of the rights, responsibility and obligation of a youth which includes;

## 2.2 | Rights of a Nigerian Youth

- Rights to life.
- Participation in policy formulation, decision making, leadership and development at local and national levels.
- Freedom of speech, expression and association.
- A secure future through policies and practice ensuring sustainable development.

## 2.3 | Responsibilities and Obligations of the Nigerian Youth

Some of these include to;

- Be patriotic and loyal to the Nigerian nation and promote her wellbeing.
- Promote and defend democracy and civility in the governance of the country and interpersonal relations with fellow citizens across the country.
- Promote human dignity and respect for adults and fellow young people, sound family and community values and community wellbeing.
- Encourage participation of young men and women in community life and development, and recognise the rights of young women and men to take responsibility for their actions and inactions.
- Create opportunities for the youth involvement in decision making that affects them, the environment and society.

## 2.4 | Conceptualising Political Participation

Verba, et al. (1978 cited in Ochei, 2023) sees political participation as those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the governmental personnel or the action that they take. Amstein (1969 cited in Samuel, 2020) postulates that political participation in decision making is a categorical term for citizen power. In agreement to this point of view, Igwe (2017) elaborately defines political participation as the degree and forms of involvement of the people in governance and related institutions of the society such as the economy and culture, this being essential under the extent of maturity of the political culture as well as the society's level of political development. To be more specific, political participation are those voluntary activities such as holding public and party offices, being candidates for offices, attending election campaigns, participating in decision making and voting in an election and other political activities.

According to Adeboye (2020) more than half of the world's population, which are under the age of 25 (between the age of 15 and 20), are in greatest need of empowerment. The youth as an important component of the civil society is in the process of self-rediscovery in an era characterised by the intense movement of the social forces of democratization and globalization. Having gone through several literature in relation to this study, some gaps that are yet to be filled were identified. Some scholars like Amadi (2021), Isiaka (2023) and Robert (2019) have attributed low input of youth participation in politics to finance, while some have argued that unemployment is the motherboard, contributing as a factor to inefficient youth inclusion in political activities.

However, these scholars have failed to recognize and identify the important consensus among political parties in considering the youth in regards to election form purchase and also the importance of political education and sensitisation of the youths. This is because, some of the youths may have the financial prowess, howbeit the desire and interest in engaging in politics may not be available, hence, enlightenment is needed.

## 2.5 | Genesis of the Not Too Young To Run Movement (NTYTRM)

A retrospective analysis by Ali and Asadu (2023) validate that the "Not Too Young to Run" movement was thus a conscious and ambitious response to the age-old exclusion of youth exclusion from Nigerian politics. Contrary to being in the majority in political statistics, Nigerian youths have been deliberately and repeatedly excluded from decision-making and governance. Perhaps the most striking impediment was the age limits set out in the 1999 Constitution (as amended), which were rigid pertaining to the ages one could qualify to fill certain offices: 30 years for House of Representatives, 35 for Senators and Governors, and 40 for presidents. These provisions effectively disqualified the majority of the population from vying for offices on age grounds (ibid.). Furthermore, Samuel (2020) posits that the roots of the Not Too Young to Run movement lie in the crossing of youth democratic activism and increasing demands for participatory democracy in Nigeria. In 2016, Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA Africa), a youth-led civil society campaign, pioneered the campaign. The alliance played a pivotal role in re-describing the disengagement of young people not as a matter of democratic deficiency but as a denial of the right to political participation and equality of representation. The campaign immediately gathered steam in civil society and was supported by national and global stakeholders, including the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the European Union, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), who were convinced that youth participation was crucial to democratic survival.

Essentially, it is critical to submit that Not Too Young to Run movement was driven by intergenerational justice, which not only demanded that youths be viewed as the future of the nation but also as co-leaders in the present-day political structure. Abiodun (2020) argues that the movement employed a strategic combination of grassroots mobilisation, media campaigns, legislative lobbying, and coalition building to advance its agenda. Activists and supporters of the movement organised town hall forums, policy discussions, street processions, and coordinated social media efforts that captured the country's attention. The hashtag #NotTooYoungToRun was a call to action that trended regularly on several social media platforms and amplified the voices of young Nigerians yearning to be part of the political process. According to Mbanefo (2022), one of the most important achievements of the campaign was its positive interaction with the National Assembly. After continuous lobbying and public pressure, the campaign gained a breakthrough in 2017 when the National Assembly passed the Not Too Young to Run Bill into law. The bill amended Sections 65, 106, 131, and 177 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), reducing the age requirements for elective offices. Thus, the minimum age requirements for various political offices were notably changed: the for presidential candidates was lowered 40 to 35, while the eligibility for the State Houses of Assembly and House of Representatives decreased from 30 to 25. Additionally, the age for governorship and Senate positions was set at 35, despite attempts to reduce it further. Although the amendments to the legislation preserved the minimum ages for the Senate and governorship, this change marked a significant victory for youth political advocacy (Loveday, 2023).

Following its passage in the National Assembly, the bill required approval from at least 24 of Nigeria's 36 State Houses of Assembly, a crucial constitutional step for amending the national charter. By March 2018, 33 State Assemblies had endorsed the bill, surpassing the constitutional requirement. Late President Muhammadu Buhari officially signed the Not Too Young to Run Bill into law on May 31, 2018. During the signing ceremony, Buhari praised the youth for their perseverance but jokingly cautioned them against challenging him in the 2019 elections. The movement's impact transcend beyond Nigeria's borders. Its success inspired similar initiatives in other African countries aimed at reforming oppressive legal systems that limited young people's political participation. In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution titled "Youth, Peace and Security" (UNSCR 2250), and subsequently, the Global Not Too Young to Run movement was launched in collaboration with the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, underscoring the international relevance of the movement.

While the NTYTR movement was successful, Amadi (2021) noted that it also exposed the deeper layers of exclusion within Nigeria's political system. Although age discrimination has been addressed, structural weaknesses such as the high cost of nomination forms, a gap in internal party democracy, restricted access to political networks, and persistent socio-cultural stereotypes remained largely unaddressed. This realization prompted YIAGA Africa and its supporters to evolve the campaign into a platform for youth political empowerment, focusing not only on legal reforms but also on providing immediate support for young candidates, enhancing voter education, and ensuring accountability. Overall, the NTYTR movement marks a significant milestone in Nigeria's democratic evolution. It demonstrates how young people's civic organization can drive legislative

reform and reshape the national political conversation and engagement. Most importantly, it has paved way for a generation of politicians who are not only legally eligible but also actively politically engaged, socially connected, and determined to influence the future of leadership in Nigeria.

## 2.6 | Theoretical Frameworks

Youth political participation and its underlying impact of structural barriers, such as party nomination forms in Nigeria, can be analysed within the tripartite theoretical framework: political participation theory, social movement theory, and elite theory. These frameworks embody the tripod interplay of youth participation, institutional structures, and power dynamics that can be critically interrogated.

## 2.7 | Political Participation Theory

Political participation theory examines the motivations, opportunities, and constraints that shape individuals' involvement in the political process. Political participation is "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (Verba and Nie, 1972, cited in Samuel, 2020). This approach recognizes both institutional (e.g., electoral laws, party systems) and individual factors (e.g., age, education, political interest) that influence civic engagement. In its applicability to the Nigerian context, the theory explains the gap between the growing youth population size and political representation. Despite comprising over 60% of the population, Nigerian youths lack sufficient representation within formal political institutions due to various obstacles, including restrictive legal frameworks (before the Not Too Young to Run Act), economic constraints, and institutionalised gerontocratic values. Excessively expensive nomination forms, absence of internal party democracy, and violence in politics serve as institutional disincentives that disproportionately burden young challengers. Utilising this theory, we understand that simply removing age barriers does not automatically lead to increased youth participation. Instead, a supportive political environment that reduces economic and structural obstacles is essential for translating political interest into meaningful representation and active participation.

## 2.8 | Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory offers insights into how marginalised communities, like youth, unite to challenge dominant political norms and advocate for change. This theory highlights key elements such as grievance mobilisation, resource mobilisation, political opportunity structures, and framing processes (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001 cited in Oshin, 2024). The Not Too Young to Run campaign exemplifies how young activists harnessed both online and offline resources to effect legislative reforms. It also demonstrates how virtual platforms broadened political opportunity structures, enabling young Nigerians to bypass traditional media and directly shape public opinion and influence politicians. The campaign succeeded because it was able to:

- Frame the issue of exclusion based on age as an insult to democratic rights;
- Make coalitions with civil society groups, media, and global actors;
- Employ social media as an organising tool to speak to a mass audience; and
- Grab windows of political opportunity, e.g., the 2019 election reform agenda, to push for constitutional change.

The #EndSARS protests exemplify the emergence of decentralised, digitally organised youth movements that challenge state power and advocate for transformative change in governance, extending beyond conventional electoral processes. Therefore, it is clear that the theory regarding social movements plays a critical role in understanding the youth's revolt against exclusion and their innovative methods of political engagement.

## 2.9 | Elite Theory

Elite theory posits that political power is held by a narrow elite group that wields control over access to resources and decision-making (Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1968, cited in Anyanwu, 2019). Elite theory is applied to understanding the political intrigues and power plays across political parties within the dilemma of political elites in the areas of nomination processes and candidate selection. In the Nigerian context, Omotoso (2019) submits that political parties are elite-driven, run like political business enterprises, and are not democratic forums. They imposed hefty nomination fees, choose their own candidates, and silenced intra-party opposition, all mechanisms through which they systematically exclude youths and other marginalised groups from political representation. Elite dominance over access to political space thereby not only weakens the representative nature of democracy but also further widens intergenerational disparity in access to governance opportunities.

Elite theory is also used to explain why, despite constitutional changes like Not Too Young to Run, most young candidates still fail. The ruling political elite still control access to campaign finance, party machinery, and political endorsement resources that are vital in Nigeria's electoral process. Therefore, elite theory highlights the paradox of formal inclusion alongside informal exclusion, where the legal framework may be democratic, but real access is limited through elite capture.

## 2.10 | Triangulating Theories: An Integrated Analytical Perspective

These theories emphasize the dynamic and complex interplay between agency and structure in Nigerian party politics. They demonstrate that young people possess both the will and capacity to engage meaningfully; however, elite political control and economic marginalisation remain significant barriers. Social movements and online activism are alternative serve as alternative avenues for expression and resistance, but deeper institutional reforms are necessary to shift the power balance from protest to authority. Theoretically, examining Nigerian youth political participation from 2015 to 2023 should focus on the structural obstacles posed by political elitism, neo-patrimonialism, youth agency and innovation of movements, and the ongoing struggle for democratic participation. Employing political participation, social movements, and elite theories provides a comprehensive framework to assess both the progress achieved through the Not Too Young to Run Act and the persistent political issues that hinder genuine youth empowerment and political advancement in Nigeria.

## 3 | METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a systematic review and thematic analysis of secondary data to investigate the limiting factors/barriers to youth political participation in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023. Data gathered was from a wide range of sources, including academic literature, policy documents like the Not Too Young to Run Act, reports from electoral bodies and civil society organizations, etc. This approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between legislative reform, financial gatekeeping, and social movements. The collected data was rigorously analyzed using a thematic analysis framework, guided by a tripartite theoretical lens of Political Participation, Social Movement, and Elite theories. This methodological synergy enabled a critical examination of how formal legal inclusion (via the NTYTR Act) was undermined by informal structures of elite capture and economic exclusion, particularly through exorbitant party nomination fees.

### Youth Participation in Elections in Nigeria (2015–2023)

#### YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA (2015–2023)

Nigeria's 2015-2023 decade is a turning point in young people's political engagement driven by a blend of demographic realities, law reforms, digital activism, and sociopolitical movements. Nigerian youth aged 15-35 years, according to the African Youth Charter, make up the majority of Nigeria's population, with over 60% consisting of those between 15 and 35 years old (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Ironically, despite this demographic premium, youth engagement with electoral politics has historically been bound by structural exclusion, economic deprivation, and partisan political culture. Yet from 2015 to 2023, significant developments arose to break this tradition, leading to increasing, though still limited, youth participation in Nigeria's elections.

#### The 2015 Elections: Marginalization amid Political Enthusiasm

According to Igwe (2017), Nigeria's 2015 general elections marked a significant milestone in the country's democratic evolution, as it was the first time that an incumbent president was ousted from office through the electoral process. While the elections were characterised by high levels of political engagement and an increased reliance on social media, yet youth participation in terms of candidacy and leadership remained largely marginal. In response to this perspective, Sesan (2018) argues that the existing constitutional age restrictions prohibited candidates under the age of 30 from vying for seats in the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly, while those below 40 were barred from running for the presidency. Therefore, the young people's involvement during the 2015 elections was largely limited to campaign volunteers, social media influencers, electoral observers, and voters.

Notably, the youth emerged as a pivotal group in terms of mobilisation and electoral turnout. According to INEC (2015, cited in Samuel, 2020) approximately 51% of registered voters in the 2015 election were aged between 18 and 35 years. However, despite their significant numbers, this study underscores the considerable challenges that the youth faced in transitioning from being mere observers of the political landscape to active participants. The political arena continued to be dominated by elderly elites, who wielded resources, connections, and institutional support to secure party tickets and run for election.

The 2019 Elections and The Effects of the ‘Not Too Young to Run’ Act

The 2019 election was the first to be held after the passage of the Not Too Young to Run Act in 2018. As stated earlier, The Act amended sections of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) to reduce the minimum age for elective offices: from 30 to 25 for the House of Representatives and State Houses of Assembly, and from 40 to 35 for the presidency. This landmark law came about following a successful campaign of advocacy by youth and spearheaded by YIAGA Africa and its partners.

Following the passage of the act, young Nigerians experienced a surge in political ambition. In 2019 elections, over 1,500 individuals under the age of 35 contested various positions across the nation (Yisa, 2019). Political parties, eager to showcase their inclusivity, nominated a great number of young candidates, especially in legislative races. Moreover, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) revealed that 51.11% of the more than 84 million registered voters in the 2019 elections were youths aged 18 to 35 years (Ibid.).

However, several challenges persisted. Among the most significant was the cost of the party nomination and expression of interest forms, which, while still affordable in many major political parties, posed a barrier for some candidates. Assessing the 2019 general elections and associated party nomination fees, Mohammed and Abba (2021) discovered that the APC charged ₦45 million for presidential nomination forms, whereas the PDP charged ₦12 million. Other parties like the African Democratic Congress (ADC) and Young Progressive Party (YPP) offered discounted or free nomination forms for women and youths. However, these parties did not have broad national coverage or electoral viability. In addition, it was obvious that dynamics of party politics in the parties often sidelined young aspirants, either by stalling them during the primary process or failing to provide the mentorship and resources necessary for securing candidacy tickets. Consequently, many young candidates found themselves withdrawing from the race, joining smaller parties, or opting to run as independents or under less mainstream platforms (Loveday, 2023). Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the 2019 elections marked a symbolic advancement, characterized by heightened visibility and political engagement among youth.

The 2023 Elections, Youth Resurgence and Electoral Awakening

The 2023 general elections represented a pivotal moment for youth political engagement in Nigeria. Unlike past elections, the 2023 elections were characterized by unprecedented youth mobilisation, largely inspired by the #EndSARS protests of 2020. These nationwide demonstrations against police brutality and governmental shortcomings sparked a new era of political awareness among Nigerian youths. Many now view the ballot box as the next battleground for the fight for accountability, justice, and reform.

Oshin (2024) highlights that millions of young Nigerians registered to vote before ahead of the 2023 elections. According to INEC, 71.4% of over 9.5 million new voters who registered through the Continuous Voter Registration (CVR) process in 2022 were between the ages of 18 and 34 (INEC, 2022 cited in Obaro, 2023). This represented the highest percentage of youth registration in Nigeria’s electoral history.

In addition to the registration efforts, the 2023 elections witnessed a significant increase in youth candidacy across Nigeria. Numerous young individuals contested for political representation within various parties, especially alternative platforms such as the Labour Party (LP), African Democratic Congress (ADC), and Youth Party. The entry of Peter Obi, the presidential candidate from the Labour Party, catalysed a remarkable surge in youth turnout (Ochei, 2023). Obaro (2023) submits that the movement that emerged, popularly referred to as the “Obidient movement”, was predominantly youth-driven, technologically adept, and socially engaged, fundamentally transforming the dynamics of political mobilisation in Nigeria. Although Peter Obi did not secure the presidency, his impressive performance, garnering over 6 million votes and finishing third, underscored the electoral influence of youth mobilisation and highlighted a growing demand for political change. Youth engagement also extended to election observation, online reporting, and community mobilization efforts. Organisations such as YIAGA Africa, BudgIT, and Enough Is Enough (EIE) played a crucial role in training youth observers and promoting voter education.

Building on the analysis presented, several challenges continue to persist. Voter apathy still remains in certain regions, while widespread logistical issues, election-related violence, and vote-trading have undermined youth trust in the democratic process. Despite increase voter turnout, a relatively small number of youth candidates secured electoral positions at both state and federal levels, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reforms. From 2015 to 2023, youth participation in Nigeria’s democracy has transitioned from marginal involvement to strategic mobilisation and candidacy.

Table 1: Tabularised summary of youth participation in elections in Nigeria (2015–2023)

S/N	Year	Registered Youth Voters	Total Voters (%)	Estimated Turnout (%)	Youth Candidacy (%)	Notes
1	2015	31.7 Million	47	40	10	High enthusiasm, low follow-up
2	2019	42.8 Million	51	29 – 30	34	Post-Not Too Young to Run
3	2023	48 Million	52.5	25	Slight Increase	Strong Social Media Presence

Source: Authors’ compilation, 2025

The Challenges of Party Nomination Forms

Interestingly, although the constitutional amendment granted young Nigerians the legal right to run for elections, the political party system, particularly the criteria for candidate selection among elites, often restricts access to leadership for many aspiring young politicians. Therefore, this section of the study explores the challenges of associated with party nominations and their subsequent implications for youth political participation in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023.

Exploring the Dynamics of Party Nomination Forms in Nigeria’s Political Landscape

Political parties in Nigeria, as required by the Electoral Act, are to conduct primary elections during which candidates to participate in general elections are elected. Hence, Alayomi (2021) submits that for any person to engage in such primaries, the aspirants are made to purchase party nomination and expression of interest forms. Parties determine the fees associated with the forms, which typically vary depending on the elective office for which the candidate is vying. For example, the nomination forms for presidential candidates are the most expensive, followed by those for governorship, Senate, House of Representatives, and State Assembly.

Expanding the above assertion, Rukayat (2023) posits that whereas the Electoral Act requires internal democracy in political parties, the fact remains that virtually all parties, including ruling parties like the All Progressives Congress (APC) and People’s Democratic Party (PDP), employ exorbitant fees as a source of funds for mobilisation and control over politics. In the 2023 elections, the APC raised the cost to ₦100 million for presidential aspirants, ₦50 million for governorship, and ₦10 million for candidates of the House of Representatives (Premium Times, 2022 cited in Ochei, 2023). Even discounts offered by some parties to young people, women, and people with disabilities often did little to ease the financial burden for many young candidates. Below is a graphical presentation.

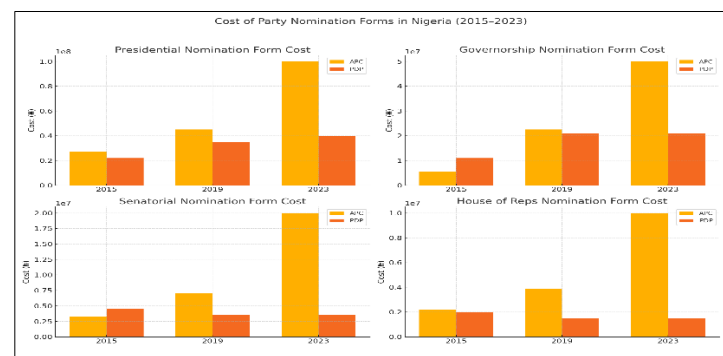


Figure 1: Cost of Party Nomination Forms in Nigeria (2015–2023)

Source: Authors’ compilation, 2025

Impact on Youth Aspirants

Assessing the implications of the exorbitant nomination fees of political parties on youth participation in Nigeria, Opemiposi (2023) argues that the expensive nature of these fees is extensive, especially in a country like Nigeria, where youth unemployment and underemployment remain consistently high. Put differently, the youth unemployment rate in Nigeria stood at more than 40%, with most youth struggling to meet basic economic requirements, much less fund political campaigns. For Michael (2021), for the average youth, raising millions of Naira just to purchase nomination forms before starting the expensive campaigning process is a daunting task, if not impossible. This ugly political scenario has led to the monetisation and commercialisation of the political landscape, where only the wealthy or those with political patrons can actually contest elections.

According to Samuel (2020), the capital-intensive nature of politics and nomination forms fuels elite capture of parties, as financially well-off political players control the selection of candidates and party chairs. This dominance not only stifles diversity within political parties but also perpetuates a cycle where the interests of the elite overshadow those of the

general populace. Consequently, youthful contenders are mostly excluded in the primaries or bribed into endorsing older candidates in return for secondary positions or general promises to support them at some unspecified later time. Thus, the most talented, interested, and talented young Nigerians are left out of the process not due to lack of capacity or interest but economic exclusion.

#### Tokenism and Superficial Concessions

In response to public outcry and civil society pressure, Rukayat (2023) argues that some political parties have introduced partial waivers or discounts for young candidates. For instance, during the 2019 and 2023 election cycles, the APC and PDP offered 50% waivers or discounts on nomination fees for youths under a certain age (usually 35 years). Ironically, such actions were cosmetic rather than revolutionary.

Firstly, even after the 50% reduction, the remaining amount was still not within the reach of most young people. A ₦5 million fee instead of ₦10 million is still out of bounds in a socio-economic context where there is poverty. Secondly, youth waivers were not applied equally and were opaque, and instances of party agents disregarding the concessions or taking iniquitous payments were reported. Thirdly, there were waivers among these that merely exempted "expression of interest" forms but not the nomination forms, thus making them effectively useless in the ultimate cost picture.

#### Internal Party Democracy and Lack of Support Structures

Lack of intra-party democracy further intensifies the impact of exorbitant nomination forms. Party primaries in Nigeria are peculiarly marked with irregularities, candidate imposition, and vote buying, among others. Even if the young potential contestants manage to purchase nomination forms, they often face significant barriers to getting the party ticket due to system patronage politics and godfatherism (Alayomi, 2021).

Additionally, Okolie (2019) argues that the political parties in Nigeria do not normally provide institutional backing or youth mentoring schemes to young politicians. In contrast to some democracies where youth wings of parties serve as leadership pipelines, most political parties in Nigeria have tokenistic youth wings that exercise no real influence on actual decision-making. This institutional shortfall diminishes the potential for youth political empowerment at a sustainable level.

#### Implications for Democracy and Political Accountability

According to Opemiposi (2023), the high cost of nomination forms has far-reaching implications for Nigeria's democratic consolidation. By limiting participation to moneybags, political competition is tilted towards the elite. Therefore, Mohammed and Abba (2021) argue that this results in recycling the same set of leaders, some of whom are disconnected from the aspirations and needs of Nigeria's youth population. Besides, contestants who invest millions to buy party tickets also have a sense of duty to recoup their "investment" once they are in office, making them indulge in corruption, rent-seeking, and misgovernance. Furthermore, Ibrahim (2021) notes that it also erodes public trust in the democratic process. When young people believe that politics is meant for the rich and connected, they lose trust, opting out of civic engagement. This further widens the gap between the governing and the governed, with catastrophic consequences for political stability and social cohesion.

Therefore, it is necessary to make the submission that the problem of party nomination forms in Nigeria is symptomatic of a deeper sickness in the nation's political process, one where leadership is more a function of cash and patronage than of merit, vision, or public service.

#### The Role of Social Movements and Digital Activism

At this juncture, it is essential to argue that the increasing relevance of social movements and cyber-activism in Nigerian politics, especially between 2015 and 2023, has been at the heart of redefining public opinion, mobilising citizens' action, and advancing the interests of youth political participation. Social movements as organised, collective efforts that aim to effect change have employed digital technologies to circumvent traditional barriers to political mobilisation, amplify marginalised voices, and drive structural change. In this context, social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube have emerged as central channels for the political voice, campaign, and mobilisation of young people.

#### Enabling Reforms in Legislation: The Not Too Young to Run Movement

One of the best examples of a youth-led social movement by online activism was the Not Too Young to Run campaign. The campaign, launched by YIAGA Africa in 2016, as reported by Louisa, Patrick, and Edward (2021), had successfully combined offline and online mobilisation to campaign for a 1999 constitutional amendment that would lower the voting age in Nigeria. Thanks to the effective application of hashtags, infographics, viral videos, and influencer campaigns, the movement propagated both domestically and internationally in no time.

The #NotTooYoungToRun movement trended on Nigerian Twitter repeatedly and suddenly became a rallying cry for youth empowerment. With direct face-offs against lawmakers on social media, virtual town halls, and mobilization of massive online petitions, the movement proved the potency of cyber activism in keeping elected legislators on their toes and to rally legislators. The final adoption of the 2018 constitutional amendment was not just a win for legislating, but was the validation of social movement strategies in the information age.

#### The #EndSARS Protests: Youth Mobilization and Democratic Demands

According to Bode and Frank (2021), there was yet another extremely critical case in the #EndSARS movement of 2020, which was initially a movement protesting police brutality, more so the excesses of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Although it began as a protest against police reform, the movement came together to become a more comprehensive youth movement against systemic injustice, government corruption, and socio-political marginalization.

Following the originator of the cause of the social movement, Ademoroti (2022) reports that digital mobilization was the impetus for the #EndSARS movement. Twitter and Instagram were utilized for the dissemination of protest sites and live streams, recording police brutality, as well as raising funds to offer legal defense, medical kits, and services through crowdsourcing. Social media influencers, artists, and content creators popularized the action, but the Feminist Coalition showed the potential of online spaces to be used to organize donations in an open-source fashion and mobilize grassroots resistance. Despite the brutal suppression by the state following the protests, i.e., Lekki Toll Gate shootings, the #EndSARS movement demonstrated the organisational power of young Nigerians and their ability to overthrow the status quo via decentralised online mobilization (Michael, 2021). Therefore, it also accelerated a new wave of political activism and civic consciousness, as some of the organizers and participants in the protests continued to conduct voter registration drives and electoral education campaigns leading up to the 2023 elections.

#### Digital Platforms as Tools for Political Education and Voter Mobilization

Statistics and results from the 2023 general election prove that social movements and digital activism have also been key in voter education, especially for young and first-time voters. There were such campaigns as #TakeBackNigeria, #ReadyToRun, and #VoteNotFight that used Twitter Spaces, Instagram Live, YouTube videos, podcasts, and memes to educate the electorate on the importance of voting, registration and acquisition of their PVCs (Permanent Voter Cards), and identifying credible candidates (Festus, 2023).

Succinctly, Mikel (2023) argues that emerging civic-tech platforms such as BudgIT, Civic Hive, and EiE Nigeria have developed applications and web-based initiatives that track public spending, track campaign promises, and unearth corruption, thus empowering young voters with the information necessary to make a choice. These interventions bridged the gap between participatory citizenship and citizen participation among Nigeria's young people who are exposed to information and communication technologies. For instance, in the run-up to Nigeria's 2023 general election, several online platforms like Stears Election Hub, ElectHER, and GoNigeria organized successful online campaigns for youth votes, comparison and exchange of candidates, and real-time/on-the-spot results. These digital platforms raised awareness not just but created forums online where policy, exchange experiences, and rebut disinformation.

Furthermore, Bode and Frank (2021) submit that campaigns like #OpenNASS (demanding transparency in National Assembly budgets), #SayNoToRape, and #RevolutionNow illustrate how online spaces are being used to challenge power configurations and demand institutional reform. The hashtags have also been used to call out individual politicians, bully government ministries, and coordinate crowd-funding for grassroots candidates, some of whom are young and under-resourced.

#### From Digital Movements to Political Candidacy

The recent social and political interest among youths has called for a critical study among scholars. The rise of a new generation of young political activists who got their start in politics on social media has been an exciting trend. Many young activists moved from online protest to running for office in 2023, spurred on by the EndSARS and Not Too Young to Run campaigns. While others were deterred by prohibitive nomination fees and party incumbency, their elections was an emblematic and material act of fusing activism with governance. Some, such as ElectHER and #RunToWin, specifically mobilised support for young women and youth moving from activist to candidate status, offering campaigning training, media coaching,

and small funding assistance. Although none of the numerous youth candidates won high offices in 2023, the online visibility and support they did garner marked Nigeria's political atmosphere towards a younger, more participatory democracy.

It is not out of place to submit and give credit at this juncture that the convergence of social movements and online activism has altered the conventional political system and changed the youth political participation in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. The advanced technologies have propelled youths to resist opaque political systems, make their voices heard, and effect public policy to an extent never seen before. Organisations like Not Too Young to Run and EndSARS illustrate the strength of online organising to drive legislative reforms, as well as civic participation. In spite of the shining problems, most importantly regarding durability, offline mobilisation, as well as government censorship, the cyber space is still an unavoidable crossroads of democratic engagement, civic awareness, as well as the agency of Nigeria's youth in the midst of the dynamic political landscape of the nation.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

The formulation and subsequent enactment into law of the Not Too Young to Run Act in 2018 was a milestone achievement that removed monumental constitutional age barriers and a catalyst towards inclusive youth participation in governance. But the Act, while it was necessary, turned out to be partial in itself. It was greeted by deeply rooted structural and institutional challenges that still denied Nigerian youth consequential participation in the political process. Incumbent parties politicized the political process to vanquish democratic values and solidify elite domination, turning elections into mere platforms of economic warfare rather than competitions of skill and ideas. This economic gatekeeping totally nullified the possibilities of the Not Too Young to Run law and further intensified youth marginalisation. Young Nigerians fought back, however, with resilience and improvisation, through social movement and online activism, demanding change, accountability, and attention. Campaigns like #NotTooYoungToRun, #EndSARS, and social media-based voter education campaigns proved the revolutionary potential of technology and bottom-up mobilisation in new political mobilisation. Social media came not as a method of communication but as a political mobiliser of youth despite the presence of state repression and internet censorship. Therefore, the journey towards a representative and inclusive democracy in Nigeria goes on. To sustain this rhythm, institutional changes must be aligned with the aspirations of a new generation that is not only not too young to rule but also strong enough to take charge.

### 4.1 | Recommendations

To enhance meaningful youth participation in Nigeria's democratic process and address the systemic barriers identified from 2015 to 2023, a multidimensional and collaborative approach is required. The following recommendations offer practical steps for policymakers, political parties, civil society organisations, the private sector, and the youth themselves:

**Regulate Nomination Fee and Expression of Interest Forms:** Party nomination fee regulation is maybe one of the most immediate reforms needed so that economically struggling candidates, particularly the youth, are not locked out of contention. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), as a matter of consensus with the National Assembly, ought to impose binding caps on the cost of nomination forms for all political seats to make them accessible and equal. Also, punish sanction parties who breach these ceilings or conceal charges in other fees (require total transparency in the cost structure for all types to prevent informal or concealed payments that hurt new entrants).

**Institutionalise Youth Quotas and Support Mechanisms in Political Parties:** Political parties ought to transcend mere provision of token concessions to the youth and institutionalise youth inclusion through the implementation of a minimum mandatory quota for representation of the youth in candidate selection and party leadership. Following this, youth support funds or bursary schemes are created within parties to assist with the cost of forms, campaigns, and logistics for real youth aspirants.

**Enhance Political Education and Leadership Capacity Building:** Political education through formal structures is inaccessible to most Nigerian youths, hence their participation or leadership being ineffectual. INEC, educational institutions, and CSOs need to introduce systematic civic education courses to secondary schools, universities, and youth centres. Aside from establishing non-partisan leadership schools to train up-and-coming young politicians in campaign strategies, ethics, government, and public speaking, promote community outreach programmes that teach young people hands-on political skills and help them build networks.

**Use Technology and Digital Media for Inclusive Participation:** Digital media and platforms are powerful tools of political mobilisation and participation. For this energy to be sustained, governments and donors must

fund digital inclusion initiatives to bridge the gap in internet access in rural and marginalised areas. Second, uphold freedoms online by bringing an end to repressive laws and encouraging activists and content producers away from censorship and intimidation.

**Encourage Cross-Sectoral Collaborations in Youth Candidacy Support:** Foreign donors, philanthropists, and private sector actors have a significant role to play by sponsoring non-partisan grant schemes to fund young people's candidacy, particularly the marginalised.

**Ensure Reforms' Accountability and Sustainability:** The reforms should not be episodic or reactive. To institutionalise gains, we must establish a youth political participation commission or an INEC-dedicated desk to monitor progress in engaging youths. Furthermore, periodically publish youth participation audits after every election cycle to measure representation and recommend areas of improvement. Additionally, improve coordination among CSOs, the media, and oversight institutions to monitor compliance by political parties with youth inclusion commitments.

On a final note, the destiny of Nigeria's democracy depends on the energised and prolonged participation of its young people. Despite some movement being made, most prominently the Not Too Young to Run Act, the pathologies of economic exclusion, structural bias, and political tokenism continue to characterise Nigerian politics. If these proposals are implemented, Nigeria can evolve beyond symbolic inclusion into substantive empowerment, having a political system with a high premium on vision, energy, and integrity instead of money, age, or privilege.

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