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Youth Political Participation and Political Power in Nigeria: A Documentary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Youth constitute a significant demographic constituency in Nigeria, yet their political and civic participation does not necessarily translate into proportional legislative representation or influence over public decisions. Although the 2018 Not Too Young To Run reform lowered age requirements for specified elective offices, party nomination procedures, campaign costs, political networks and socioeconomic inequalities may continue to constrain inclusion. This study examines the relationship between youth political participation and political power in Nigeria, distinguishing participation, formal representation and political influence. It adopts a qualitative documentary research design, analysing 25 documents comprising scholarly publications, electoral reports, policy documents and legislation published between 1999 and 2023, alongside earlier works providing theoretical and historical context. The analysis is guided by the Civic Voluntarism Model, particularly its emphasis on resources, political engagement and recruitment networks, while considering structural barriers, party gatekeeping and political opportunity structures. Qualitative content analysis examines documented participation patterns, access to political institutions and the relationship between participation, representation and influence. The proposed Youth Political Participation Paradox, describing the possible coexistence of substantial youth engagement and limited representation, is treated as an analytical proposition rather than an established national pattern. The study concludes that legal eligibility and civic engagement alone do not guarantee substantive political inclusion. It provides a framework for analysing participation, representation and political influence as distinct but interconnected dimensions of youth inclusion in Nigeria.

Keywords: Youth Political Participation, Political Power, Youth Representation, Not Too Young To Run, Civic Voluntarism Model, Party Gatekeeping, Digital Activism

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Introduction

Youth political participation contributes to democratic development through civic engagement, electoral competition and public decision-making. However, demographic significance does not necessarily translate into proportional legislative representation or political influence. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2023) reported that people aged 10–24 constituted 31.7% of Nigeria's population, while approximately 63% were below 25 years. Although these categories differ from electoral definitions of youth, they demonstrate the importance of examining young people's access to political institutions.

Definitions of youth vary across legal and policy frameworks. The African Youth Charter defines youth as persons aged 15–35, whereas Nigeria's National Youth Policy 2019–2023 adopted the range of 15–29 years (African Union, 2006; Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2019). This study uses the 18–35 age bracket for electoral analysis where consistent with Yiaga Africa's classifications, while acknowledging differences in age boundaries across sources.

Despite their demographic importance, young Nigerians remain underrepresented in elected legislative institutions. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2024) reported 37,060,399 registered voters aged 18–34 in 2023, representing 39.65% of the 93,469,008 registered voters. This figure indicates their electoral presence but does not establish actual turnout. Yiaga Africa (2023) reported

that 14 candidates aged 25–35 won seats in the 360-member House of Representatives, while 92 young representatives secured seats in State Houses of Assembly. These statistics illustrate the distinction between electoral participation and legislative representation, although their different age classifications require caution when making comparisons.

The 2018 constitutional amendment associated with the Not Too Young To Run movement reduced minimum age requirements for specified elective offices (Library of Congress, 2018). Nevertheless, legal eligibility does not guarantee party nomination or electoral success. Yiaga Africa (2023) reported that youth candidacy declined from approximately 34% in 2019 to 28.6% in 2023. This trend raises questions about campaign financing, nomination procedures and access to electoral competition, although the figures alone do not establish the causes of the decline.

Young people also participate through civic advocacy, election observation, protests and digital mobilisation. The 2020 #EndSARS movement illustrates youth-associated mobilisation around police accountability and governance. Abimbade et al. (2022) examined digital activism within the Nigerian Twitterscape, highlighting online networks as channels for political communication and collective action. However, mobilisation does not necessarily produce formal representation or sustained policy influence.

The Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM), developed by Brady et al. (1995), explains participation through resources, psychological engagement and recruitment networks. Its application to Nigeria requires consideration of party gatekeeping, patronage, campaign expenditure and unequal access to political networks, which may affect young people's opportunities to contest elections.

Accordingly, this study distinguishes participation, representation and political influence. Participation involves electoral and civic activities; representation concerns young people's presence in formal decision-making institutions; and influence refers to their capacity to shape political agendas, policies and institutional decisions. These dimensions inform the proposed Youth Political Participation Paradox, which describes the possible coexistence of substantial youth engagement and limited formal representation. The study examines this proposition, the demographic–representation gap and the relationship between digital mobilisation and political power in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. It also evaluates the explanatory contributions and limitations of the CVM.

Statement of the Problem

The central problem is the uncertain relationship between youth political engagement and access to substantive political power in Nigeria. Although young people constitute a substantial proportion of registered voters, their representation in legislative institutions remains limited. The 2019 and 2023 electoral figures reported by Yiaga Africa (2023) further indicate a decline in youth candidacy, raising questions about whether constitutional reform has been accompanied by sufficient improvements in access to electoral competition.

Party nomination procedures, campaign financing, internal party democracy and unequal political networks may constrain young aspirants. However, available documentary evidence does not independently establish the extent to which these factors explain observed electoral outcomes. Similarly, youth-led protests, digital campaigns and civic advocacy provide channels for expressing political demands but do not necessarily translate into formal representation or influence over public policy. Election to office also does not automatically guarantee the capacity to shape institutional decisions.

Although the CVM provides a useful framework for understanding participation through resources, engagement and recruitment networks (Brady et al., 1995), its explanatory value must be assessed alongside Nigeria's institutional arrangements and structural inequalities.

This study therefore investigates how existing documentary evidence explains the relationship between youth participation, legislative representation and political influence in Nigeria. It examines the implications of the Not Too Young To Run reform, barriers to electoral inclusion and the contribution of digital mobilisation, while assessing the CVM's relevance and limitations. The central concern is whether,

and under what conditions, youth engagement translates into meaningful representation and influence over political decisions.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

i. What forms of youth political and civic participation are documented in existing literature and relevant reports in Nigeria?
ii. What individual, institutional, socioeconomic and political factors are identified as shaping young people's access to political parties, electoral candidacy and formal political institutions?
iii. How does the available documentary evidence explain the relationship between youth political participation, political representation and political influence in Nigeria, particularly in relation to the Not Too Young To Run reform and digital political mobilisation?

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine youth political participation and political power in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the relationship between political engagement, representation in formal political institutions and influence over political decision-making.

The specific objectives are to:

i. Examine the forms of political and civic participation among young Nigerians documented in relevant scholarly literature, electoral reports and policy documents.
ii. Analyse the individual, institutional, socioeconomic and political factors shaping young people's access to political parties, electoral candidacy and formal political institutions.
iii. Assess the extent to which available documentary evidence explains the relationship between youth political participation, political representation and influence over political decision-making in Nigeria, with particular attention to the opportunities and limitations associated with the Not Too Young To Run reform and digital political mobilisation.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Youth

Youth is a multidimensional concept referring to a transitional stage of life during which individuals develop social, economic, political and civic responsibilities while progressing towards independence. Its age boundaries vary across societies and institutions according to demographic conditions, socioeconomic circumstances and policy objectives. International development frameworks recognise youth inclusion as important to social development, democratic governance and political participation (UNDP, 2014, 2024).

In Nigeria, young people occupy diverse social and economic positions, including students, unemployed graduates, entrepreneurs, professionals, political activists and party members. These differences may influence their access to political information, financial resources, organisational networks and opportunities for participation. Youth should therefore be understood as a heterogeneous category rather than a politically uniform group.

Young people's political experiences may also differ according to gender, education, geographical location, socioeconomic status, disability, employment and access to digital technology. These factors may shape participation opportunities, although their specific effects require supporting evidence. Accordingly, this study examines the conditions under which young Nigerians can enter political institutions, secure representation and influence decisions, without assuming that participation necessarily produces either outcome.

Concept of Politics

Politics concerns the processes through which individuals and groups negotiate power, authority, resources and collective decisions. It operates through formal institutions, including government, legislatures, political parties and elections, as well as informal activities intended to influence public debate and governmental decisions.

Young Nigerians participate through voting, party membership, campaigning, contesting elections, election observation, contacting representatives, civic organising, demonstrations, policy advocacy and digital communication. These activities provide opportunities to express political preferences and demand accountability, but differ in their proximity to formal decision-making.

For instance, an online campaign or demonstration may draw attention to a public concern without producing a policy change. Similarly, party membership may facilitate political organisation without guaranteeing nomination or leadership, while election to public office provides formal institutional access without necessarily ensuring decisive policy influence. Politics is therefore understood in this study as an arena in which individuals and groups seek to influence public authority, resource allocation and policy. The analysis focuses on how political engagement relates to access to decision-making, drawing on relevant research on Nigerian digital activism and participatory governance where supported by the cited evidence (Abimbade et al., 2022; Omilusi, 2025).

Concept of Active Political Participation

Active political participation involves deliberate activities through which individuals seek to influence political leadership, public policy and governmental decisions. Conventional forms include voting, party membership, campaigning, contesting elections and contacting elected representatives, while other forms encompass protests, petitions, digital activism, civic advocacy and community mobilisation.

This study distinguishes formal participation, involving electoral activities and elected office, from alternative participation, including protests, digital campaigns, civil society engagement and issue-based advocacy. These categories may overlap, but participation through one channel does not necessarily establish engagement through another.

The 2020 #EndSARS protests illustrate youth-associated mobilisation against police brutality and demands for accountability. However, this example does not establish a general withdrawal from electoral politics or demonstrate sustained policy influence. Claims about declining conventional participation require supporting evidence from electoral statistics, surveys and studies of specific mobilisation activities.

The Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) identifies resources, psychological engagement and recruitment networks as determinants of political participation (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). In Nigeria, these factors include young people's time, financial resources, civic skills, political interest and social connections. However, willingness and capacity to participate may not guarantee access to political institutions. Party gatekeeping, nomination procedures, candidate selection and political opportunity structures also shape electoral access. Integrating these institutional factors with the CVM provides a broader framework for understanding the conditions under which youth engagement translates into representation and political influence.

Political Participation, Representation and Political Power

Political participation, political representation and political power are interconnected but distinct concepts. Political participation refers to activities intended to influence political processes. Political representation concerns the presence and role of individuals or groups within political institutions, including elected legislatures. Political power refers to the capacity to shape political decisions, influence public policy or affect the exercise of public authority.

These distinctions are essential to assessing youth inclusion in Nigeria. A high proportion of young people among registered voters indicates their presence in the electorate but does not establish proportional representation among candidates or elected officials. Similarly, the election of young representatives

demonstrates descriptive representation but does not, without further evidence, establish their influence over legislative priorities, party decisions or public policy.

The relationship between participation and representation may be shaped by electoral rules, party nomination procedures, campaign costs, political networks, incumbent advantage and socioeconomic conditions. Their effects must be investigated rather than assumed to be uniform across young people. Likewise, representation may translate into political influence differently depending on officeholders' authority, positions within party structures and opportunities to shape policy agendas.

This study therefore examines three dimensions: documented forms of youth participation, young people's access to electoral candidacy and elected office, and evidence of their influence over political decisions. Appropriate indicators and sources are required for each dimension. Participation is not treated as sufficient evidence of representation, nor is representation assumed to demonstrate substantive political power.

Historical Overview of Youth Political Participation in Nigeria

Youth Political Participation in the Fourth Republic

Youth political participation in Nigeria has taken several forms, including voting, party mobilisation, student activism, civic advocacy, public demonstrations and digital campaigns. These activities have a longer history than the Fourth Republic. The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), established in 1956, provided a national platform for student organisation, while the 1978 "Ali Must Go" protests and the anti-Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) protests of 1989 illustrated the capacity of student movements to mobilise against government policies. Student organisations also participated in pro-democracy activism during the period of military rule. These historical experiences provide important context for understanding youth participation as both electoral engagement and collective political action (National Association of Nigerian Students [NANS], n.d.).

Since the restoration of democratic rule in 1999, young Nigerians have participated in elections as voters, campaigners, party members and civic organisers. However, participation has not necessarily translated into proportional representation in elected institutions. The distinction is important because the ability to mobilise voters or express political demands does not automatically confer access to party nominations, electoral victory or influence over public decisions.

Under the original 1999 constitutional framework, candidates had to be at least 40 years old to contest the presidency, 35 to contest the Senate and governorship, and 30 to contest the House of Representatives and State Houses of Assembly. These requirements excluded some younger adults from contesting particular offices, even though they could participate in other aspects of the political process. The constitutional age requirements therefore formed one institutional barrier to youth candidacy before the 2018 reform (Library of Congress, 2018).

The Not Too Young To Run Reform and the 2019 Elections

The *Not Too Young To Run* movement campaigned for constitutional reform to lower the minimum age requirements for elective offices. The constitutional alteration signed into law in May 2018 reduced the minimum age for presidential candidates from 40 to 35, for Senate and governorship candidates from 35 to 30, and for House of Representatives and State House of Assembly candidates from 30 to 25. The reform widened the range of younger adults legally eligible to contest these offices, although it did not remove other barriers associated with party selection, campaign resources and electoral competition (Library of Congress, 2018; Yiaga Africa, 2020).

The 2019 general elections provided an early opportunity to assess youth candidacy after the reform. Yiaga Africa (2020) reported that 1,515 youth candidates contested National Assembly seats, representing approximately 23% of candidates for those positions. Of these candidates, 1,314 were male and 201 were female. The distribution points to a substantial gender imbalance among youth aspirants, although these figures alone do not explain the causes of that imbalance.

For the House of Representatives, 1,262 youth candidates contested the 360 seats, representing 27.4% of candidates, compared with 18% in 2015. Yiaga Africa (2020) further reported that 266 of these candidates benefited directly from the reduced age requirements. The figures indicate that the reform expanded eligibility for some aspirants and coincided with an increase in youth candidacy. They do not, by themselves, establish that the constitutional amendment was the sole cause of the increase, since party decisions, campaign resources and wider electoral conditions may also have influenced candidate numbers.

Youth representation in the House of Representatives increased modestly in 2019. Twelve members-elect were under 35, compared with three in 2015 (Yiaga Africa, 2020). Despite this increase, young members remained a small minority in the 360-seat chamber. The difference between the number of young candidates and the number elected illustrates that access to candidacy does not necessarily translate into electoral success or substantial legislative representation.

Yiaga Africa (2020) also reported that young people constituted 51.11% of Nigeria's 84,004,084 registered voters in 2019 and recorded a turnout figure of 46.3% for young registered voters in the presidential and National Assembly elections. These figures should be reported with the age definition and calculation used in the original report. The proportion of young people among registered voters is not equivalent to the proportion of the entire youth population that registered or voted. Likewise, turnout data indicate electoral participation but cannot, without further evidence, establish the degree of political influence young voters exercised.

Youth Candidacy in the 2023 Elections

The 2023 general elections provided a further opportunity to examine youth candidacy after the *Not Too Young To Run* reform. Yiaga Africa (2023) reported that the overall proportion of youth candidates declined from approximately 34% in 2019 to 28.6% in 2023. The proportion of candidates classified as youth fell from 27.4% to 21.6% for the House of Representatives and from 41.8% to 35.6% for State Houses of Assembly.

Youth candidacy also differed across electoral institutions. In 2023, young people accounted for 35.6% of candidates for State Houses of Assembly, 21.6% for the House of Representatives and 3.7% for the Senate (Yiaga Africa, 2023). These differences indicate that youth participation as candidates varied by office. However, the proportions do not independently explain why fewer young people contested some offices or whether youth candidates had comparable opportunities to secure party nominations and win elections.

The representation figures further illustrate the distinction between candidacy and electoral success. Yiaga Africa's (2023) analysis of elected candidates reported that 14 young legislators aged 18–35 won seats in the 360-member House of Representatives, while 92 young legislators won seats in State Houses of Assembly. These figures provide an indication of youth representation in the legislative institutions covered by the report. They should be interpreted in line with the report's stated age classification and the relevant denominator for each chamber.

The decline in youth candidacy between 2019 and 2023 raises questions about whether legal reform has been accompanied by sufficient changes in the conditions governing political competition. Nomination fees, campaign expenses, party gatekeeping, political networks and intra-party selection processes are relevant issues to investigate. Nevertheless, the observed decline cannot be attributed to any one of these factors on the basis of candidate statistics alone. The evidence instead suggests that legal eligibility and practical access to electoral competition are separate dimensions of youth inclusion.

Youth Civic Mobilisation and Digital Activism

Youth political participation in Nigeria also extends beyond elections and formal party activity. Student organisations, civic groups, advocacy campaigns and public demonstrations have provided channels through which young people communicate political demands, challenge government policies and seek accountability. Examples include student-led protests, the 2012 *Occupy Nigeria* mobilisation against fuel subsidy removal, the *Bring Back Our Girls* campaign following the 2014 abduction of schoolgirls in Chibok,

and the #EndSARS protests of 2020. These movements differed in their immediate objectives and organisational forms, but each illustrates a form of political engagement outside routine electoral competition (NANS, n.d.).

The #EndSARS movement is particularly relevant to the relationship between digital mobilisation and political participation. Research by Abimbade et al. (2022) examined Nigerian youths' use of social media and physical protest to organise around police brutality and demand government action. Their study identifies digital communication as a means of circulating information, coordinating action and shaping public discussion. This evidence supports treating digital activism as an important channel of civic engagement.

However, participation in protests and online campaigns should not be equated with electoral engagement or formal political representation. The visibility of a movement does not establish that participants subsequently joined political parties, contested elections, entered elected institutions or sustained influence over public policy. The relationship between digital mobilisation and formal political power therefore requires separate investigation. In this study, #EndSARS is considered evidence of civic mobilisation, not sufficient proof that digital participation produces lasting institutional influence.

Historical Implications for Youth Political Representation

The historical evidence points to three related developments. First, constitutional age requirements restricted the eligibility of younger Nigerians for specified elective offices before 2018. Secondly, the *Not Too Young To Run* reform widened legal eligibility and coincided with increased youth candidacy and a modest rise in the number of young members-elect in the 2019 House of Representatives. Thirdly, youth candidacy declined in 2023 despite the continued availability of the reduced age thresholds (Library of Congress, 2018; Yiaga Africa, 2020, 2023).

These developments underline the need to distinguish among four indicators of youth political inclusion. Registered-voter data show young people's presence in the electorate; candidate statistics measure participation in electoral competition; election results indicate representation in elected office; and evidence of legislative activity, policy engagement or decision-making is needed to assess political influence. The indicators are related, but none can substitute for the others.

The historical overview also shows why electoral participation should be considered alongside civic and digital mobilisation. Youth movements have provided channels for collective political expression, but the extent to which such participation leads to sustained access to parties, elected institutions and policy decisions remains an empirical question. Accordingly, the analysis of youth political inclusion must consider the interaction between legal eligibility, party selection processes, access to campaign resources and opportunities to influence political decisions. The evidence does not establish that one factor explains the experiences of all young Nigerians; rather, it provides a basis for examining the conditions under which participation may translate into representation and influence.

Challenges to Youth Political Participation in Nigeria

Institutional Barriers and the Limited Impact of Legal Reform

The 2018 constitutional amendment associated with the *Not Too Young To Run* movement reduced the minimum age requirements for specified elective offices, removing a formal barrier to youth candidacy. However, legal eligibility does not guarantee party nomination, electoral success, representation or influence over political decisions. Political parties remain central to electoral competition because their nomination procedures and internal decision-making structures determine access to candidacy.

Young aspirants may encounter difficulties where nomination processes favour individuals with substantial financial resources, established political networks or relationships with influential party members. The decline in youth candidacy between 2019 and 2023 highlights the need to investigate these practical constraints. Yiaga Africa (2023) reported that overall youth candidacy fell from 34% to 28.6%, while the proportions for the House of Representatives and State Houses of Assembly declined from 27.4%

to 21.6% and 41.8% to 35.6%, respectively. Although these figures demonstrate a decline, they do not independently establish its causes.

Assessing the reform therefore requires examining participation in party primaries, access to nomination forms, candidate selection, electoral success and representation within party leadership structures. Such evidence would provide a more comprehensive understanding of youth inclusion than constitutional eligibility alone.

Financial Barriers and the Cost of Party Nomination

Financial resources influence political participation because electoral competition involves nomination fees, campaign materials, transport, publicity, communication and organisational expenses. The Civic Voluntarism Model identifies money, time and civic skills as important resources for participation (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). In Nigeria, high nomination charges may disadvantage aspirants with limited personal resources or access to political sponsors.

Table 1. Reported party nomination charges by elective office and election year

Elective office	Party	2015	2019	2023
President	PDP	₦22 million	₦12 million	₦40 million
President	APC	₦27.5 million	₦45 million	₦100 million
Governor	PDP	₦11 million	₦6 million	₦21 million
Governor	APC	₦5.5m non-incumbent; ₦10.5m incumbent	₦22.5 million	₦50 million
Senate	PDP	₦4.5 million	₦3.5 million	₦3.5 million
Senate	APC	₦3.3m non-incumbent; ₦5.3m incumbent	₦7 million	₦20 million
House of Representatives	PDP	₦2.5 million	₦1.5 million	₦2.5 million
House of Representatives	APC	₦2.2m non-incumbent; ₦3.2m incumbent	₦3.85 million	₦10 million
State House of Assembly	PDP	₦1.2 million	₦600,000	₦600,000
State House of Assembly	APC	₦550,000 non-incumbent; ₦800,000 incumbent	₦850,000	₦2 million

Source: Figures supplied from Punch (10 April 2022) and Daily Trust (15 May 2022).

The table illustrates differences in nomination charges across parties, offices and election years. For example, the reported APC presidential fee rose from ₦27.5 million in 2015 to ₦100 million in 2023, while its House of Representatives fee increased from ₦3.85 million in 2019 to ₦10 million in 2023. These charges illustrate the financial demands associated with seeking party nominations.

Nomination fees represent only part of electoral expenditure. Aspirants must also consider campaign organisation, transport, publicity and voter mobilisation. Young people with limited income or fundraising networks may consequently face difficulties entering electoral competition. Nevertheless, financial disadvantage should not be assumed to affect all young aspirants equally, and the figures alone cannot establish that nomination charges caused the decline in youth candidacy. Further evidence is needed to assess the relative influence of financial requirements, party procedures and access to political sponsorship.

Socioeconomic Inequality and Access to Political Resources

Socioeconomic inequality may shape access to money, time, education, political information, transport, communication facilities and organisational networks. These resources influence individuals' capacity to participate in civic activities and sustain electoral campaigns (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995).

Young people experiencing financial insecurity may find it difficult to obtain nomination forms, organise campaigns, travel to constituencies and maintain contact with voters. Unequal access to political networks may also affect their ability to mobilise supporters and secure organisational assistance. However, some young aspirants benefit from professional careers, family resources or support from political

organisations. The relevant question is therefore whether unequal resource distribution creates unequal opportunities, rather than whether all young people experience the same disadvantages.

Socioeconomic constraints may also affect participation beyond electoral candidacy. Limited access to education, transport and digital technology may restrict involvement in political meetings, civic organisations and advocacy. Conversely, economic dissatisfaction may motivate demonstrations and demands for accountability. Economic insecurity should not automatically be equated with political apathy, since its effects depend on individual circumstances and available opportunities.

Youth Unemployment, Political Patronage and Dependence

Youth unemployment and underemployment may affect financial independence, available time and access to political resources. Young people experiencing economic insecurity may have fewer resources to sustain political activities or compete for elective office. However, the extent of this relationship requires supporting labour-market statistics and empirical research.

Economic dependence may also influence relationships between young political participants and established political actors. Where funding, employment or organisational support depends on influential individuals, young aspirants may become reliant on political sponsors. Patronage may consequently affect their autonomy when access to resources is linked to personal loyalty or political support. Nevertheless, unemployment alone does not demonstrate susceptibility to political manipulation, and such claims require direct evidence.

The relationship between employment and participation is complex. Economic insecurity may constrain access to electoral competition while motivating civic mobilisation and demands for policy change. Employment initiatives may improve material conditions, but they cannot independently eliminate exclusionary nomination procedures or unequal campaign financing. Youth inclusion therefore requires attention to both socioeconomic circumstances and the institutional allocation of political opportunities.

Political Education, Civic Awareness and Digital Literacy

Political education helps young citizens understand constitutional rights, electoral procedures, public institutions and mechanisms for holding officials accountable. It should cover not only voting and registration but also party nominations, legislative responsibilities, public budgeting, peaceful advocacy and institutional monitoring.

Access to information does not necessarily ensure the ability to evaluate it critically. Digital platforms facilitate political discussion and mobilisation but may also expose users to misinformation, propaganda, harassment and polarising content. Effective participation therefore requires digital literacy, source evaluation and responsible communication alongside access to technology.

Educational institutions, civil society organisations and electoral bodies can support civic learning through practical programmes that develop political knowledge and participation skills. However, political education alone cannot overcome high nomination charges, unequal campaign financing or exclusionary party practices. It should complement, rather than replace, institutional reforms.

Cultural Norms, Age-Based Exclusion and Unequal Opportunities

Social expectations concerning age, authority and leadership may shape perceptions of young aspirants. Where political experience is associated with older age, younger candidates may encounter doubts about their competence or readiness to lead. Such perceptions may influence voters, party officials and established political actors, although their effects must be demonstrated through empirical evidence rather than generalised across Nigeria.

Age-related disadvantages may intersect with gender and other forms of inequality. Young women may face gender expectations, limited political networks, financial constraints, harassment or political violence. Yiaga Africa (2020) reported that women accounted for 201 of the 1,515 youth candidates contesting National Assembly seats in 2019. This indicates that young women constituted a minority of these candidates but does not establish the causes of the disparity.

Further analysis should examine nomination outcomes, electoral success and relevant social factors, using evidence disaggregated by age, gender and electoral office where available. Recognising differences within the youth population enables more precise identification of barriers and avoids treating young Nigerians as a homogeneous group.

Overall, youth political participation in Nigeria is shaped by the interaction of institutional procedures, financial demands, socioeconomic circumstances, political networks, civic knowledge and social expectations. Addressing these challenges requires more than legal reform: it also requires transparent party processes, fairer access to political resources and evidence-based measures that expand opportunities for meaningful participation and representation.

Opportunities for Youth Political Participation in Nigeria

Digital Platforms and Youth-Led Civic Innovation

Digital platforms provide young Nigerians with additional channels for political communication, civic engagement and collective mobilisation. Platforms such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube enable users to disseminate political information, discuss public policies, organise campaigns and communicate demands to public officials. Research on the #EndSARS movement illustrates the relevance of digital communication to youth-associated mobilisation in Nigeria (Abimbade et al., 2022; Omilusi, 2025).

Digital participation can reduce some organisational barriers by connecting individuals and civic networks beyond conventional political structures. However, access remains uneven because of internet costs, connectivity, digital literacy, language, disability and access to suitable devices. Online engagement may also expose participants to misinformation, harassment, surveillance and political polarisation. Digital platforms should therefore be regarded as potential channels for participation rather than inherently inclusive solutions.

The #EndSARS movement of 2020 demonstrated how digital communication could support mobilisation around police reform and institutional accountability. Nevertheless, this case alone cannot establish that digital activism consistently produces policy change, increases electoral participation or improves youth representation. Such outcomes require separate evidence. The democratic value of digital engagement should consequently be assessed through documented civic activities, institutional responses, policy changes and opportunities for continuing public consultation.

Youth-Led Movements and Issue-Based Participation

Youth-led movements and issue-based campaigns provide opportunities to engage with political issues beyond conventional party structures. Young people may mobilise around unemployment, education, police accountability, electoral integrity, corruption, gender equality and environmental protection. Such participation can publicise neglected concerns, develop organisational networks and encourage engagement with public officials (Abimbade et al., 2022; Omilusi, 2025).

Civil society organisations can support these activities through civic education, leadership development, election observation, policy advocacy and public consultation. Participation may also help young people acquire organisational skills and develop policy proposals. However, involvement in issue-based movements does not necessarily indicate withdrawal from electoral politics. Young people may simultaneously participate in protests, vote, campaign for candidates and engage in party activities. Establishing changes in their political preferences would require comparative evidence across these forms of participation.

The effectiveness of youth-led mobilisation depends partly on its ability to sustain organisation, articulate clear demands and establish relationships with relevant institutions. Public authorities must also provide meaningful opportunities for engagement. Movements may attract considerable attention without achieving lasting institutional change where these conditions are absent. Their outcomes should therefore

be assessed through evidence of policy responses, institutional reforms, sustained civic networks and subsequent engagement with political institutions.

Institutional and Electoral Reform

Institutional and electoral reforms can improve young people's access to formal political participation. Relevant measures include transparent party nominations, stronger internal party democracy, accessible candidate-selection procedures, effective campaign-finance regulation, protection against political violence and equitable access to political information.

The *Not Too Young To Run* constitutional amendment of 2018 reduced formal age restrictions for specified elective offices. However, the decline in youth candidacy between the 2019 and 2023 general elections suggests that legal eligibility alone did not ensure sustained improvement in youth participation as candidates (Yiaga Africa, 2020, 2023). This highlights the importance of addressing institutional and financial barriers alongside constitutional reform.

Political parties could improve access by publishing nomination requirements and fees, applying selection rules consistently, explaining primary-election procedures and establishing transparent complaint mechanisms. Greater transparency in nomination charges and campaign expenditure, supported by effective enforcement of existing regulations, could also strengthen accountability. Any proposal to subsidise nomination fees or provide financial assistance to young candidates should establish clear eligibility criteria and safeguards against political favouritism.

Youth quotas and other affirmative representation measures may also be considered to address persistent under-representation. Their design would need to specify the qualifying age range, whether quotas apply to party nominations or elected seats, how compliance would be monitored and what support young representatives would receive. Their potential benefits and limitations should be assessed against Nigeria's constitutional and electoral arrangements.

Reforms should ultimately be evaluated by their outcomes rather than their formal adoption. Relevant indicators include the proportion of young aspirants securing party nominations, youth candidacy rates, electoral success, representation in political institutions and participation in decision-making. These measures help distinguish expanded legal eligibility from meaningful political inclusion.

Civic Education, Political Skills and Leadership Development

Civic education and leadership development can strengthen young people's capacity to participate in political and public life. Knowledge of constitutional rights, electoral procedures, political institutions, public policy and accountability mechanisms can support informed participation. Training in public speaking, policy analysis, community organising, political communication and campaign management may further develop relevant skills.

Civic education should cover both electoral and non-electoral activities, including voting, party nominations, legislative responsibilities, public budgeting, local government, peaceful advocacy, election observation and reporting electoral violations. Educational institutions, civil society organisations, electoral bodies and community groups can deliver these programmes through mentoring, public forums and practical engagement with political institutions. Political parties can also establish transparent leadership-development programmes and provide younger members with opportunities to participate in internal decision-making.

Nevertheless, civic education cannot substitute for institutional reform. Young people may possess political knowledge and leadership skills but remain excluded by financial constraints, restrictive nomination practices and limited political networks. Its effectiveness should therefore be assessed through changes in political knowledge, civic engagement, access to leadership opportunities and participation in formal political processes, rather than programme attendance alone.

Civil Society Organisations and Youth Political Networks

Civil society organisations and youth networks provide platforms for civic education, advocacy, election monitoring, policy engagement and leadership development. They can connect young people with public institutions, facilitate dialogue with officials and help communicate collective concerns. Electoral observation and accountability initiatives also enable participants to monitor electoral processes, document irregularities and present findings to relevant authorities.

These networks may strengthen organisational skills, facilitate information-sharing and coordinate activities across communities. However, participation in civil society does not automatically translate into political representation or institutional influence. Outcomes depend on organisational resources, continuity, objectives and access to decision-making institutions. Some organisations focus on public awareness, while others engage directly in electoral monitoring or policy processes.

Their contribution should be assessed through documented outcomes, including election-monitoring reports, policy submissions, sustained civic networks, formal consultation opportunities and institutional responses. This approach helps establish both their contribution to youth participation and the limits of their influence.

Linking Participation to Representation and Political Influence

The opportunities discussed above operate through different channels and do not necessarily produce equivalent outcomes. Digital activism and issue-based movements may expand public debate; civic education can strengthen political knowledge and skills; civil society networks can facilitate advocacy; and electoral reforms may widen access to candidacy and decision-making. The relationship between these opportunities must be examined empirically rather than assumed.

Three dimensions are particularly important to this study. First, **political participation** refers to involvement in activities such as voting, party engagement, demonstrations, advocacy and digital mobilisation. Secondly, **political representation** concerns access to candidacy and the presence of young people in elected or other relevant political institutions. Thirdly, **political influence** refers to the capacity to shape decisions, affect policy priorities or participate meaningfully in institutional processes.

Distinguishing these dimensions enables a more precise assessment of youth inclusion. Increased online activity may indicate greater civic engagement, but further evidence is needed to determine whether it influences policy or improves access to political institutions. Similarly, higher youth candidacy does not necessarily demonstrate increased electoral success or substantive political influence.

The central opportunity lies in strengthening connections between youth engagement and responsive political institutions. Digital communication, civic mobilisation, leadership development and electoral reform may contribute to this process, provided that young people have accessible channels for participation, fair opportunities to compete for office and meaningful routes into decision-making. Their effectiveness should be judged by demonstrable changes in participation, representation and political influence.

Empirical Review

Existing empirical literature examines youth political participation in Nigeria through electoral engagement, political representation, student activism, digital mobilisation and socioeconomic conditions. These studies show that youth participation extends beyond voting and party membership to include protests, advocacy and civic organising. However, participation does not necessarily translate into electoral representation or influence over public decisions, making it necessary to examine the historical development of youth activism, electoral reforms and institutional barriers.

Historically, the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), established in 1934, contributed to nationalist politics by mobilising political awareness and advocating political, economic and educational reforms. Arifalo (1986) documents the movement's development between 1934 and 1941. Although the NYM was not exclusively composed of young people in the contemporary demographic sense, its activities illustrate the

importance of organised political mobilisation in Nigeria's nationalist struggle. Student activism subsequently became another channel of political engagement. The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), established in 1956, was associated with the 1978 *Ali Must Go* protests against increased education costs. Its successor, the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), continued student advocacy on educational and national political issues. These experiences demonstrate that youth participation has historically encompassed protest, collective mobilisation and demands for accountability, although they do not establish whether such activities translated into sustained representation within elected institutions.

Contemporary studies increasingly examine digital communication as a means of political expression and mobilisation. Obisesan (2022), in examining social media and youth participation during the 2019 general elections, explores the relevance of digital platforms to electoral engagement. Similarly, Abimbade et al. (2022) investigate how online mobilisation within the Nigerian Twittersphere developed into collective action during the #EndSARS movement. Omilusi (2025) also examines youth protests and participatory governance in the digital age. Collectively, these studies illustrate how digital networks facilitate political communication, advocacy and demands for accountability. Nevertheless, online engagement and protest participation do not automatically produce electoral success, representation or direct influence over government decisions. Their implications for democratic participation must therefore be assessed separately from their institutional outcomes.

Political parties constitute another important avenue for youth participation. Ekot and Momoh (2024) examine youth participation in party politics during the 2023 general elections, contributing to understanding the opportunities and limitations associated with engagement in formal political organisations. Party membership, campaigning and mobilisation may provide opportunities for participation without guaranteeing influence over candidate selection, party leadership or electoral outcomes. The Not Too Young To Run constitutional reform, enacted in May 2018, reduced the minimum age requirements for several elective offices, including the presidency, governorships, the Senate, the House of Representatives and State Houses of Assembly. The reform expanded formal eligibility for younger candidates but did not eliminate financial and institutional barriers to electoral competition.

Dambo et al. (2022) examine youth political marginalisation and the use of social media to advance inclusion through the Not Too Young To Run campaign. Their study highlights the relevance of digital mobilisation to demands for political reform. Yiaga Africa (2023), in its report on youth candidacy in the 2023 general elections, provides evidence for assessing youth participation following the reform. However, legal eligibility and candidacy should be distinguished from electoral success. Assessing the reform's outcomes requires comparable data on youth candidates and elected representatives across elections, using consistent age categories and electoral offices. Financial constraints, nomination fees, party gatekeeping, established political networks and unequal access to campaign resources may continue to limit young aspirants. These barriers require examination through evidence on nomination procedures, candidate experiences and electoral outcomes rather than inference from underrepresentation alone.

Political violence and socioeconomic disadvantage further shape opportunities for participation. Alabi (2023), drawing on Afrobarometer survey data, examines factors associated with political violence in Nigeria, including age, poverty, political partisanship and political participation. Davis and Turnbull (2024) similarly examine youth engagement in violent electoral environments, highlighting the importance of political security and institutional responsiveness. These studies suggest that participation must be understood within the conditions under which citizens engage in political activities. Nevertheless, claims about youth apathy, political interest or turnout require direct evidence from surveys and electoral data rather than conclusions drawn solely from studies of political violence.

Ageism is another potential barrier to youth representation. The historical existence of minimum-age restrictions demonstrates how formal rules limited younger citizens' eligibility for certain offices. However, continued underrepresentation following the Not Too Young To Run reform does not, by itself, establish that age discrimination is the principal cause. Evidence concerning party nomination practices, public attitudes and the treatment of younger aspirants is needed to establish the extent of age-related exclusion. Economic disadvantage is similarly relevant because limited financial resources can restrict

access to nomination forms, campaigns and political networks. Brady et al. (1995) identify time, money and civic skills as important resources for political participation. Although their resource model was developed in the United States, it offers a useful analytical framework for examining participation in Nigeria, provided local party structures and socioeconomic conditions are considered. The National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reported an unemployment rate of 8.6% among persons aged 15–24 in the third quarter of 2023. While this figure indicates labour-market challenges for the specified age group, it does not directly establish political exclusion or demonstrate that unemployment necessarily reduces participation.

Overall, existing studies provide valuable insights into historical activism, digital mobilisation, electoral reform and the institutional and socioeconomic constraints affecting young Nigerians. However, the relationship between participation, representation and political influence requires further analytical attention. Participation encompasses voting, party membership, campaigning, protests and advocacy; representation concerns young people's presence in elected institutions; and political influence involves their capacity to shape decisions and institutional priorities. These dimensions are related but not interchangeable. This study addresses the relationship among them through qualitative documentary analysis, focusing particularly on the Not Too Young To Run reform and the 2023 general elections. Guided by the Civic Voluntarism Model, it examines how resources, political engagement, recruitment and institutional barriers affect the conversion of youth participation into political representation, while recognising that claims about policy influence require evidence directly addressing decision-making outcomes.

Gap in the Literature

The reviewed literature identifies several dimensions of youth political participation in Nigeria. Historical studies explain the contribution of youth-oriented political movements and student activism to nationalist mobilisation, public protest and demands for accountability. Contemporary studies examine digital activism, electoral engagement and the use of social media to mobilise young people around political issues. Research on the Not Too Young To Run reform addresses formal eligibility and the campaign for greater political inclusion, while studies of political violence and socioeconomic constraints highlight the conditions under which young people participate.

Despite these contributions, the literature needs to be examined more systematically in relation to the distinction between participation, representation and political power. Participation refers to activities such as voting, party membership, campaigning, protests, advocacy and digital mobilisation. Representation concerns the presence of young people in elected institutions, while political power involves their capacity to influence decisions, institutional priorities and the distribution of public resources. These dimensions are related but are not interchangeable. Young people may participate extensively in civic and electoral activities without gaining proportionate access to elected office; likewise, the election of some young representatives does not necessarily establish that young people generally possess substantial influence over public decisions.

The present study addresses this analytical gap by examining the relationship between youth political participation, institutional access and political representation in Nigeria, with particular attention to developments surrounding the Not Too Young To Run reform and the 2023 general elections. Using qualitative documentary analysis, it draws on scholarly literature, electoral reports, policy documents and relevant institutional publications to assess how participation is represented in existing evidence and how institutional and socioeconomic constraints may affect its conversion into political representation and influence. The Civic Voluntarism Model provides the principal framework for analysing resources, political engagement and recruitment, while party gatekeeping and nomination practices are considered as institutional conditions shaping access to electoral competition. The study thus distinguishes evidence of political participation from evidence of representation and influence, recognising that claims about policy outcomes require direct evidence of decision-making or policy change.

Research Method

The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design to examine youth political participation, representation and political influence in Nigeria. This design was appropriate because it relied on existing scholarship, electoral evidence, legislation, policy documents and institutional reports rather than primary survey or interview data. Documentary analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of documents to understand a research problem (Bowen, 2009). Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, constitutional and legislative documents, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) reports and Yiaga Africa publications.

Literature searches were conducted using Google Scholar and African Journals Online (AJOL), supplemented by materials from the official websites of INEC and Yiaga Africa. Search terms included "youth political participation in Nigeria", "youth political representation", "Not Too Young To Run", "party gatekeeping", "political finance" and "digital activism in Nigeria". The search covered publications from 1999 to 2023, with earlier works included for theoretical and historical context. Particular attention was given to the 2018 constitutional reform and the 2019 and 2023 general elections.

As searches were not logged contemporaneously, the numbers of records retrieved, screened and excluded could not be reliably reconstructed. A provisional inventory identified 25 distinct source items across the original and revised manuscript versions, but this did not establish the final number analysed. The study was therefore treated as a qualitative documentary review rather than a systematic review with a complete search and screening record.

Documents were purposively selected based on relevance, credibility, transparency and contribution to the research objectives. Eligible materials addressed youth participation, electoral competition, party processes, electoral reform, legislative representation, civic mobilisation and political influence. Sources were assessed according to authorship, institutional authority, publication details, methodological transparency and relevance. Materials with unverifiable origins, insufficient information or limited relevance were excluded.

Qualitative content analysis was employed to identify and interpret recurring themes in the documents (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM), particularly its emphasis on resources, engagement and recruitment networks, informed the analytical framework (Brady et al., 1995). Institutional accessibility, structural barriers, political opportunity structures and party gatekeeping were also considered.

Coding combined deductive categories derived from the research questions and theoretical framework with inductive themes emerging from the documents. Categories included political resources, civic engagement, recruitment networks, nomination procedures, campaign costs, socioeconomic inequality, digital mobilisation, electoral reform, youth representation and political influence. Relevant passages were manually classified, compared and refined. No qualitative data-analysis software was used.

Comparative analysis examined recurring themes, contrasting interpretations and gaps across academic studies, electoral reports, legislation and institutional publications. Particular attention was given to distinguishing participation from representation and political influence. Claims concerning youth under-representation, gender inequalities and the Not Too Young To Run reform were interpreted in relation to the definitions, indicators and limitations reported by the original sources. Electoral statistics were treated as descriptive evidence rather than conclusive proof of causality.

The study's conclusions were based on the relevance, credibility and consistency of available documentary evidence. However, document availability, methodological quality, inconsistent youth classifications and the absence of a contemporaneous search log constrained the analysis. The design could not independently establish causal relationships or capture the experiences of all young Nigerians. Consequently, conclusions concerning electoral reform, party gatekeeping and digital mobilisation were framed cautiously. The study provides a focused synthesis of existing evidence while identifying areas requiring further empirical investigation.

Discussion of Key Findings

Finding One: Forms of Youth Political and Civic Participation in Nigeria

The documentary analysis identifies several forms of youth political and civic participation in Nigeria, including electoral engagement, party activities, civil society involvement, issue-based campaigns, protests, election observation and digital advocacy. These activities demonstrate that participation extends beyond voting and party membership to include expressing political concerns, mobilising support and demanding institutional accountability. The 2020 #EndSARS movement provides an example of youth-led mobilisation against police brutality and governance failures. Abimbade et al. (2022) examine digital networks in Nigerian youth activism, highlighting their role in information sharing, collective mobilisation and political expression.

This finding aligns with the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM), which explains participation through resources, political engagement and recruitment networks (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). Digital platforms can facilitate communication and coordination, while civic organisations and social networks create opportunities for collective action. However, online visibility does not necessarily produce sustained engagement or demonstrate the prevalence of particular participation patterns among young Nigerians.

Consistent with the qualitative documentary design, this finding derives from published research and institutional materials rather than a new population survey. The evidence identifies documented participation forms but does not establish their prevalence, frequency or changes over time nationwide. Such conclusions would require comparable survey findings, voter-registration and turnout statistics, or longitudinal evidence.

This finding addresses the first research objective by identifying documented forms of youth political and civic participation. It also distinguishes the existence of political activities from their distribution across the youth population, recognising that young Nigerians participate through different channels and to varying extents.

Finding Two: Factors Shaping Youth Access to Political Institutions

The second finding is that legal eligibility, political participation and access to elected office are distinct outcomes. The 2018 Not Too Young To Run constitutional reform reduced minimum age requirements for specified elective offices, expanding eligibility for younger aspirants. However, Yiaga Africa (2020, 2023) distinguishes youth candidacy from electoral success. The reported decline in youth candidacy between the 2019 and 2023 general elections raises concerns about access to electoral competition, although the figures do not independently establish the reasons for this decline.

The Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) explains potential barriers through its emphasis on resources, political engagement and recruitment networks (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). Financial resources influence the capacity of young aspirants to meet nomination and campaign expenses, while political networks facilitate access to party leaders, endorsements and recruitment opportunities. Nomination procedures also shape whether politically active young people secure candidacies.

Party gatekeeping, structural barriers and political opportunity structures provide complementary explanations. Party gatekeeping concerns how party leaders and nomination procedures regulate access to candidacy. Structural barriers include socioeconomic inequalities and unequal access to finance and influential networks, while political opportunity structures encompass institutional conditions that facilitate or constrain participation. Together, these concepts illuminate different dimensions of access to formal politics.

The reviewed literature also raises concerns about gender and socioeconomic inequalities. However, gender differences among candidates do not independently establish the mechanisms producing them. Similarly, campaign costs and economic insecurity represent plausible constraints, but their individual effects on candidacy remain unverified. Further investigation requires disaggregated electoral statistics and evidence from nomination and campaign processes.

This finding addresses the second research objective by identifying financial, institutional, network-related and socioeconomic factors potentially shaping youth access to political institutions. It clarifies the CVM's explanatory value and limitations: although the model explains how resources, engagement and recruitment influence participation, the additional concepts illuminate how institutional arrangements mediate the transition from participation to candidacy and representation. Given the documentary design, these factors are interpreted as themes in the reviewed literature rather than independently established causes of political exclusion.

Finding Three: Youth Participation, Political Representation and Political Influence

The third finding is that political participation, representation and influence are interconnected but distinct dimensions of democratic inclusion. Young people may engage in voting, campaigning, civic advocacy, protests and digital mobilisation without securing elected office. Similarly, election to office does not necessarily establish their influence on legislative priorities, public policy or institutional decisions. Assessing youth inclusion therefore requires distinguishing participation, candidacy, electoral success and decision-making influence.

Yiaga Africa's electoral reports illustrate the distinction between candidacy and representation. Yiaga Africa (2020) reported that 12 members-elect under 35 entered the House of Representatives after the 2019 general elections, compared with three in 2015. Its 2023 analysis recorded 14 young legislators in the 360-member House of Representatives and 92 in State Houses of Assembly. These figures describe representation but do not establish legislators' policy influence, which requires examining legislative proceedings, committee activities, sponsored bills, voting records and policy decisions.

The analysis indicates that a substantial youth population or electorate does not automatically translate into proportional candidacy or representation. Similarly, increased candidacy does not guarantee electoral success, while civic mobilisation does not necessarily secure institutional access.

The proposed Youth Political Participation Paradox is therefore treated as an analytical proposition rather than an established national pattern. It suggests that substantial youth engagement may coexist with limited representation or influence. Assessing this proposition requires comparable data on youth participation, population, registered voters, candidates and elected officials across electoral cycles. Differences in age classifications and data sources must be considered, while political influence requires separate assessment.

This finding addresses the third research objective by clarifying these distinctions. The reviewed documents do not establish that digital mobilisation produces representation, that young legislators necessarily exercise substantial policy influence, or that any single institutional factor explains the participation–power gap. Overall, youth inclusion requires attention to participation, electoral access, representation and decision-making influence. The documentary design identifies relevant patterns but cannot establish nationwide prevalence or causal relationships.

Comparative Evidence on Youth Demographic Presence, Electoral Participation and Representation

Official electoral data provide a useful basis for comparing youth participation and representation in the 2019 and 2023 general elections. INEC reported that 42,938,458 registered voters aged 18–35 accounted for 51.11% of the 84,004,084 registered voters in 2019. In 2023, INEC recorded 37,060,399 registered voters aged 18–34, representing 39.65% of 93,469,008 registered voters. These figures show the substantial presence of young people in both electorates, but the percentages should not be interpreted as a direct measure of change because the age classifications differ between the two elections.

Table 2. Comparison of youth demographic presence, electoral participation and representation, 2019 and 2023

Indicator	2019 general election	2023 general election
Youth share of total population	No directly comparable election-year estimate established from the sources reviewed	No directly comparable election-year estimate established from the sources reviewed
Youth share of registered electorate	51.11% (ages 18–35)	39.65% (ages 18–34)
Overall youth candidacy	Approximately 34% of candidates	28.6% of candidates; 4,398 of 15,336 candidates
Youth candidates for House of Representatives	1,262; 27.4% of candidates	21.6% of candidates
Youth candidates for State Houses of Assembly	41.8% of candidates	35.6% of candidates
Young members elected to House of Representatives	12 members under 35, as reported by Yiaga Africa	14 members aged 25–35, representing 3.92% of the 360 seats
Youth representation in State Houses of Assembly	8.9% of seats, as reported in Yiaga Africa's 2023 comparison	92 members under 35; 9.2% of 993 seats

Sources: INEC (2020, 2024); Yiaga Africa (2020, 2023). The reports use different age categories in some indicators; figures should not be treated as fully comparable where definitions differ.

Interpretation of the Comparative Evidence

The table highlights a distinction between young people's demographic and electoral presence and their access to elected office. In 2019, people aged 18–35 constituted 51.11% of registered voters, while youth candidates represented approximately 34% of all candidates. In 2023, youth candidates accounted for 28.6%. This suggests that demographic significance does not automatically translate into proportionate candidacy. However, INEC's use of ages 18–35 for its 2019 voter statistics and 18–34 for 2023 means that the electorate figures do not establish a directly comparable change in youth registration.

Youth candidacy also varied across legislative institutions. Young people represented 27.4% of House of Representatives candidates and 41.8% of State House of Assembly candidates in 2019. These proportions declined to 21.6% and 35.6%, respectively, in 2023. This variation suggests that access to electoral competition differed by level of government. Yiaga Africa identified high nomination costs and commercialised party primaries among concerns associated with youth candidacy. Although relevant to campaign finance and party gatekeeping, the descriptive figures cannot independently establish the effects of these barriers.

Legislative representation presents a more qualified pattern. The number of young members in the House of Representatives increased from 12 in 2019 to 14 in 2023, while youth representation in State Houses of Assembly rose from 8.9% to 9.2%, according to Yiaga Africa. Thus, declining youth candidacy did not correspond with a decline in every measure of representation. Candidacy and electoral success should therefore be treated as distinct outcomes.

A further limitation concerns population data. The sources consulted do not provide directly comparable estimates of Nigeria's population aged 18–35 for both election years. Population figures should not be presented as election-year estimates without verifying their reference years, age definitions and demographic bases.

Overall, the comparison indicates that youth inclusion should be assessed across participation, candidacy, electoral success and representation. A substantial presence in the electorate does not guarantee candidacy or election, while election to office does not establish influence over political decisions. The evidence is consistent with the proposed Youth Political Participation Paradox as a possible gap between participation and institutional representation. However, assessing political influence requires further evidence from legislative activities, policy decisions and institutional responses.

Conclusion

This study examined youth political participation and political power in Nigeria through qualitative documentary analysis of scholarly literature and institutional publications. The findings indicate that youth participation encompasses electoral engagement, party activities, civic advocacy, protests, civil society involvement and digital mobilisation. However, participation, representation and political influence are distinct dimensions of democratic inclusion. Civic engagement does not necessarily translate into elected office or influence over public policy and institutional decisions.

The 2018 Not Too Young To Run constitutional reform expanded eligibility for specified elective offices. Nevertheless, evidence from the 2019 and 2023 general elections indicates that legal eligibility alone does not guarantee candidacy or electoral success. Limited legislative representation and changes in youth candidacy highlight potential barriers involving party nomination procedures, campaign financing, political networks and unequal access to resources. However, the documentary design cannot establish their independent causal effects.

Protests, civic organisations, issue-based campaigns and digital advocacy provide alternative channels for political expression and mobilisation. Nevertheless, these activities cannot automatically be equated with formal representation or policy influence. Youth inclusion must therefore be assessed through civic engagement, access to candidacy, electoral outcomes and participation in institutional decision-making.

The study is constrained by the availability, credibility and comparability of existing documents. Differences in youth age classifications, indicators and reporting periods complicate comparisons. The evidence cannot establish nationwide participation patterns or determine the causal effects of campaign costs, party gatekeeping and digital mobilisation. Future research should combine comparable electoral statistics, youth surveys, interviews and legislative records to investigate these relationships.

Several practical implications follow. Political parties should promote transparent candidate selection and equitable opportunities for young aspirants. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and democracy-support organisations should publish age- and gender-disaggregated data on registered voters, candidates and elected officials using consistent definitions. Civic organisations and public institutions should assess youth engagement through consultation, representation and decision-making rather than attendance or online mobilisation alone.

Measures to improve youth representation, including quotas, warrant consideration. However, their effectiveness requires further investigation. Policymakers should consult young people, political parties, electoral institutions and civil society on legally grounded options, including reserved seats or enforceable youth candidacy requirements. Such measures should define eligible age groups, implementation procedures and review periods while guarding against tokenism and political favouritism. Evaluation should consider candidacy, electoral success, gender inclusion and legislative participation.

Ultimately, strengthening youth political inclusion requires more than reducing age restrictions or encouraging civic engagement. It demands fair access to candidacy, adequate resources, transparent party practices and responsive institutions. Nigeria's democratic development would benefit from measures enabling young people to contest elections, contribute to public institutions and hold political leaders accountable. The central concern remains whether, and under what conditions, participation translates into equitable representation and meaningful political influence.

Recommendations and Implementation Plan

The recommendations derive from the study's three principal findings and comparative electoral evidence. Each identifies the relevant finding, responsible actors, proposed actions and measurable indicators for evaluating implementation.

Strengthening Youth Political and Civic Participation

Linked finding**:** Finding One established that youth participation extends beyond voting and party membership to include civic advocacy, protests, election observation, civil society engagement and digital mobilisation.

Responsible actors**:** Political parties, civil society organisations, youth organisations and public institutions.

Proposed actions: These actors should expand opportunities for youth participation in party activities, public consultations, election observation and policy advocacy. Digital mobilisation should be connected to sustained civic engagement and institutional dialogue.

Performance indicators**:** Progress should be measured through the number of youth consultation forums conducted, the proportion of participants aged 18–35, the number of youth proposals considered by public institutions and documented institutional responses to youth-led advocacy.

Improving Transparency in Party Nomination

Linked finding: Finding Two identified party gatekeeping, unequal political networks and financial constraints as potential barriers to youth candidacy.

Responsible actors**:** Political parties, INEC and civil society organisations.

Proposed actions: Political parties should publish nomination rules, fees, eligibility requirements and selection procedures before primaries. Accessible complaints mechanisms should address nomination irregularities and unfair exclusion.

Performance indicators**:** These should include the proportion of parties publishing nomination requirements, the availability of complaints mechanisms, the proportion of complaints resolved and changes in youth candidacy across electoral cycles.

Reducing Financial Barriers to Candidacy

Linked finding**:** Finding Two and the comparative evidence suggest that financial resources may influence youth access to electoral competition, although their independent causal effects remain unverified.

Responsible actors**:** Political parties, the National Assembly, INEC within its statutory mandate and civil society organisations.

Proposed actions**:** Political parties should review nomination fees and related charges that may disadvantage aspirants with limited resources. Policymakers should consider transparent campaign-support mechanisms with appropriate financial disclosure and accountability safeguards.

Performance indicators**:** Progress should be assessed through published nomination fees, changes in costs relative to relevant income measures, availability of transparent support mechanisms and youth candidacy rates disaggregated by gender and elective office.

Introducing Enforceable Youth Candidacy Quotas

Linked finding**:** Findings Two and Three indicate that legal eligibility and a substantial youth presence among registered voters do not automatically translate into proportionate candidacy or representation.

Responsible actors: National Assembly, political parties, INEC within its constitutional and statutory mandate, and civil society organisations.

Proposed actions**:** Nigeria should pursue enforceable youth candidacy quotas to improve young people's access to electoral competition. Voluntary commitments may be insufficient where party gatekeeping and unequal access to resources persist. Relevant stakeholders should assess legally appropriate arrangements covering party nominations or candidate lists, alongside the constitutional implications of reserved seats.

Any framework should specify eligible age groups, offices covered, compliance requirements, implementation timelines and review procedures. Gender inclusion and safeguards against tokenism or preferential treatment for politically connected aspirants should be incorporated.

Performance indicators**:** These should include adoption of an appropriate quota framework, the proportion of youth candidates nominated by each party, compliance rates, youth electoral success and the gender composition of candidates and elected representatives.

Policy position**:** Youth quotas should form part of broader electoral reform, complementing transparent primaries, affordable nomination procedures and internal party democracy. Their effectiveness should be evaluated through changes in candidacy, electoral success and representation. Although this study supports their consideration, its documentary design cannot establish the effects of a particular quota arrangement.

Improving Youth Electoral Data

Linked finding: The comparative analysis identified inconsistencies in age classifications and reporting periods that limit direct comparisons between the 2019 and 2023 elections.

Responsible actors: INEC, Yiaga Africa and other credible election-monitoring organisations.

Proposed actions: These institutions should publish age- and gender-disaggregated statistics on registered voters, candidates and elected officials. Changes in age classifications and indicators should be clearly explained, with comparable measures provided where possible.

Performance indicators**:** Progress should be assessed through the availability of accessible datasets, consistency of age definitions and denominators, publication of comparable statistics across electoral cycles and regular data updates.

Assessing Youth Representation and Political Influence

Linked finding: Finding Three established that electoral representation does not necessarily demonstrate young legislators' influence over policy and institutional decisions.

Responsible actors: National Assembly, State Houses of Assembly, legislative monitoring organisations and academic researchers.

Proposed actions: Legislative institutions and monitoring organisations should assess youth legislators' participation in debates, committees, bill sponsorship, voting and policy development, distinguishing formal representation from demonstrable contributions to policy outcomes.

Performance indicators: These should include committee participation, bills sponsored or co-sponsored, voting records, contributions to debates and documented policy proposals adopted or incorporated into institutional decisions.

Strengthening Research and Evaluation

Linked finding: All three findings highlight the need to distinguish participation, candidacy, electoral success, representation and political influence.

Responsible actors: INEC, universities, research institutions, civil society organisations and democracy-support partners.

Proposed actions**:** Future research should combine comparable electoral statistics with youth surveys, interviews, party nomination records and legislative evidence. Longitudinal studies should investigate how resources, party gatekeeping, digital mobilisation and institutional opportunities shape youth inclusion.

Performance indicators**:** Progress should be assessed through the availability of comparable datasets, the number of empirical studies published, periodic youth inclusion assessments and documented policy responses to research findings.

Implementation and Monitoring

Implementation should proceed through three overlapping phases. The institutional preparation phase should involve reviewing party nomination procedures, improving electoral data and consulting stakeholders on legally appropriate youth quotas. The reform and implementation phase should introduce transparent nomination procedures, measures to widen access and an enforceable quota framework, subject to the necessary legal processes. The monitoring and evaluation phase should assess changes in youth participation, candidacy, electoral success, representation and legislative influence after each electoral cycle.

Responsible institutions should establish baselines and measurable targets before implementation. Where reliable baseline data are unavailable, these should be developed before numerical targets are set.

Ultimately, strengthening youth political inclusion requires more than reducing age restrictions or encouraging civic engagement. It demands fair access to candidacy, transparent party practices, adequate political resources and responsive institutions. This plan translates the study's findings into measurable actions while recognising that the effectiveness of specific interventions requires subsequent empirical evaluation.

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