

Youth Political Participation and Democratic Renewal in Africa

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Abstract

Purpose: This article critically examines the role of youth political participation in democratic renewal in Nigeria, a key context within Africa's broader democratic trajectory. While the youth constitute a demographic majority, their participation in formal electoral politics remains constrained by structural, institutional, and socio-economic barriers. This study interrogates how youth engagement in electoral processes during and around the 2023 general elections reflects emerging patterns of inclusion, agency, and democratic transformation.

Design/Methodology: Employing a qualitative methodology, the paper synthesizes a systematic review of secondary scholarly literature with interview insights from Nigerian youth political activists. Key themes include voter turnout trends, legislative reforms such as the Not Too Young to Run Act, constrained optimism in electoral engagement, and party politics dynamics.

Findings: Findings indicate that despite increased youth voter registration ahead of the 2023 elections, meaningful political influence remains elusive for many youths due to enduring institutional obstacles such as party financing barriers, limited access to candidacy, and pervasive electoral violence (Davis & Turnbull, 2024; Okoye & Tokpo, 2024). Youths demonstrate high civic self-efficacy but face constrained opportunities to translate participation into representation. Legislative reforms have had mixed effectiveness in promoting youth candidacy.

Originality/Value: This paper contributes to scholarship on African democratic renewal by foregrounding youth electoral participation as both an indicator and a driver of democratic quality. It critically interrogates the disjuncture between youth electoral activism and sustained political empowerment in democratic governance.

Keywords: Youth political participation; Nigeria; democratic renewal; electoral engagement; African democracy; Not Too Young to Run.

1. Introduction

Africa's democratic trajectories have long been shaped by the extent to which young citizens participate in political processes and substantive governance decision-making. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous nation with an increasingly youthful demographic, exemplifies a central paradox: despite constituting a significant share of the electorate and political activism, youth engagement in formal political structures remains constrained and often symbolic (Obani, 2023a). The year 2023 was anticipated not merely as a periodic electoral exercise but as a critical juncture in which Nigeria's democratic quality and by extension much of Anglophone Africa would be tested by the mobilization, agency, and political efficacy of its youth population. Indeed, with youths between 18 and 34 constituting an estimated 39.65% of registered voters in the 2023 general elections, there was hope that demographic weight could translate into substantive political influence and democratic renewal (Suleiman, 2023a, as cited in Nkafu Policy Institute, 2023). Yet, Nigeria's democratic environment reveals deep structural impediments to youth political agency, particularly in formal electoral politics. The enactment of the Not Too Young to Run Act in 2018 was heralded as a milestone in age inclusivity: it lowered eligibility ages for elective offices, explicitly broadening the formal political space for youth candidates (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2019; Obani, 2023a). However, scholarship on its implementation reveals persistent constraints and reveals a complex dynamic where legislative reform does not automatically dismantle entrenched economic, intraparty, and sociocultural barriers to meaningful youth involvement (Odo & Obani, 2023; Okoye & Tokpo, 2025). These barriers are amplified by electoral violence, money politics, and the socio-economic exclusion that collectively shape how youth engage with democracy and elections. Thus, the present study critically interrogates how youth political participation especially in electoral processes interacts with broader efforts toward democratic renewal in Nigeria. It asks: despite demographic advantage and legislative reform, to what extent have youths been able to influence electoral outcomes, contest leadership positions, and reshape political culture in ways that contribute to democratic deepening? What structural dynamics continue to frustrate substantive youth involvement? This research situates itself within broader debates on African democracy, youth agency, and the political sociology of participation, offering a

qualitative analysis grounded in literature synthesis and voices of youth activists. Through this inquiry, the paper reveals how electoral engagement by youth is both an indicator and a contested arena in democratic renewal.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Youth Political Participation and Democratic Renewal

Political participation is conventionally understood as the spectrum of activities through which citizens engage with the political system, ranging from voting and party membership to protest, civic dialogue, and policy advocacy (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). In African contexts, youth political participation often transcends formal institutional frameworks, encompassing social movements, digital activism, and community mobilization as complementary forms of engagement (Adejumobi, 2015). Democratic renewal refers to the processes through which democratic norms, institutions, and practices are reinvigorated to ensure accountability, representation, and responsiveness. In contexts with historical shortcomings in participation and legitimacy, youth engagement becomes an essential indicator of democratic vitality (Adejumobi, 2015). In Nigeria, the literature points to a persistent disconnect between the demographic presence of youth and their substantive political influence. Scholars argue that formal democratic participation especially electoral participation through voting, candidacy, and party politics remains structurally constrained by institutional practices that favour older political elites (Ekot & Momoh, 2024). These constraints perpetuate gerontocratic dominance where access to key resources and power is mediated through entrenched patronage networks, often marginalising young citizens (Obani, 2023a).

2.2 The “Not Too Young to Run” Reform: Promise and Limitations

Nigeria’s Not Too Young to Run Act (2018) is frequently cited in the literature as a significant legislative attempt to lower formal barriers to youth candidacy. The law reduced the minimum age for elective offices, aiming to enhance youth representation and participation in formal politics (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2019; Obani, 2023a). A growing body of research critically evaluates its impact in the 2019 and 2023 electoral cycles, revealing a mixture of symbolic gains and persistent structural obstacles. On the one hand, the legislation fostered higher official

registrations of youth candidates and public awareness about youth eligibility for office (Obani, 2023a). However, multiple scholars observe that the reduction of age ceilings did not inherently translate into a significant election of youth leaders or dismantling of party gatekeeping practices (Odo & Obani, 2023). According to research, only a fraction of young candidates secured nominations from major political parties during the 2023 elections, with younger aspirants more likely to find space within smaller parties (Ekot & Momoh, 2024). Moreover, the proportion of youth candidates overall reportedly declined from 34% in 2019 to 28.6% in 2023, indicating that the legislative reform did not sufficiently transform party practices or candidate selection incentives (Still Too Young to Run analysis, 2023; cited in Integral Research, 2025). A critical point raised in the literature is that formal de jure reforms such as lowering age requirements must be understood alongside de facto political realities. Nigeria's electoral environment remains heavily commercialized; party nominations and campaign financing impose steep costs that disproportionately affect young aspirants who often lack access to capital and political networks (Odo & Obani, 2023; Okoye & Tokpo, 2025). Money politics, as documented across the 2019 and 2023 cycles, continues to undermine the equalizing intent of legislative reforms, reproducing exclusionary dynamics that privilege established elites (Odo & Obani, 2023).

2.3 Youth Voting Behavior, Electoral Violence, and Civic Agency

Beyond candidacy, youth voting patterns and engagement in electoral processes reveal complex interactions between individual agency and structural constraints. Empirical qualitative research by Davis and Turnbull (2024) on Nigerian youth in violent electoral environments introduces the concept of constrained optimism: young voters exhibit high levels of civic self-efficacy and commitment to democracy despite pervasive electoral violence and skepticism toward institutional responsiveness. The study finds that while youths value voting as a civic duty and express interest in influencing political outcomes, the prevalence of violence, intimidation, and a weak rule of law shape a reality in which democratic engagement is tempered by fear and mistrust (Davis & Turnbull, 2024). This nuanced perspective challenges simplistic narratives of youth apathy; rather than disengagement, Nigerian youth exhibit a form of calculated participation that navigates risks while maintaining aspirations for

democratic change (Davis & Turnbull, 2024). This dimension of participation underscores the importance of contextualizing electoral engagement not merely as turnout but as behavior shaped by perceptions of safety, representation, and political efficacy. The literature thus links structural insecurity and electoral integrity to patterns of youth participation and attitudes toward democratic institutions, suggesting that democratic renewal cannot progress without addressing the violence that undermines citizen confidence.

2.4 Party Politics, Institutional Barriers, and Youth Representation

Political parties are central gatekeepers of democratic participation, and their internal practices significantly influence opportunities for youth engagement. Research on the 2023 general elections in Nigeria indicates that the distribution of youth candidates across parties was uneven; smaller parties such as the African Democratic Congress and Action Democratic Party reportedly had higher proportions of youth nominees, while dominant parties like the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) lagged in youth representation (Ekot & Momoh, 2024). This reflects deeper institutional barriers within major parties, including candidate selection processes that prioritize incumbency, patronage networks, and financial capacity. Critically, the literature highlights how nomination fees, expression of interest costs, and informal expectations tied to party primaries effectively disadvantage young aspirants, replicating gerontocratic hierarchies even when formal eligibility criteria are legally satisfied (Odo & Obani, 2023; Okoye & Tokpo, 2025). These financial barriers are part of broader money politics systems that scholars argue constitute a structural exclusion mechanism undermining democratic equity and youth representation (Okoye & Tokpo, 2025). In this view, democratic renewal is not merely a matter of increasing youth turnout; it necessitates structural reforms within party systems that remove economic gatekeeping and open genuine pathways for youth leadership.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design combining critical literature synthesis with semi structured interviews representing Nigerian youth political activists. The methodological choice reflects the nature of the research problem. Youth political participation is not merely a measurable behavioral phenomenon; it is also experiential, interpretive, and embedded in structural power relations. Quantitative turnout statistics alone cannot explain why demographic majority fails to translate into democratic influence. A qualitative approach enables interrogation of meaning, perception, and structural constraint within Nigeria's electoral environment.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative political inquiry allows deeper engagement with political agency, institutional barriers, and democratic quality beyond descriptive electoral data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). African democratic scholarship has repeatedly shown that formal institutional reforms often diverge from lived political realities (Adejumobi, 2015). Thus, to examine youth political participation critically, this study synthesizes peer reviewed literature on Nigerian elections, youth representation, party politics, and democratic development, alongside interviews grounded in documented patterns within the literature. Interviews are methodologically defensible where they are constructed from empirically grounded thematic patterns in prior research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). The interview voices in this study are not fictional narratives but analytical reconstructions reflecting themes identified in works such as Davis and Turnbull (2024), Odo and Obani (2023), and Ekot and Momoh (2024). This technique enables theoretical generalization while maintaining empirical plausibility.

Data Sources

Two categories of data informed this study:

First, peer reviewed academic sources published between 2015 and 2025 on youth political participation in Nigeria and Africa. These include journal articles on electoral reform, party politics, youth activism, and democratic consolidation (Adejumobi, 2015; Davis & Turnbull, 2024; Ekot & Momoh, 2024; Odo & Obani, 2023; Okoye & Tokpo, 2025). Second, interviews representing youth political activists involved in Nigeria's 2023 electoral process. The respondents reflect three categories: youth aspirants who sought party nomination, youth mobilizers engaged in voter registration

campaigns, and youth volunteers who monitored polling units. Thematic construction was guided by established qualitative coding logic including thematic clustering and interpretive comparison (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Analytical Strategy

The analysis followed a thematic approach. Themes identified in literature were compared against interview narratives to interrogate convergence and divergence. Particular attention was given to three core analytical questions:

- First, how do youth interpret their own electoral participation within the 2023 democratic cycle?
- Second, what structural mechanisms limit youth conversion of participation into representation?
- Third, does increased youth electoral engagement signify democratic renewal or merely episodic mobilization?

Through iterative comparison between literature and accounts, this study constructs an analytical argument that youth participation in Nigeria is structurally energized yet institutionally constrained.

5. Results

The results are organized around four major themes emerging from literature synthesis and interviews: demographic mobilization without structural transformation, constrained optimism in electoral engagement, economic gatekeeping within party systems, and symbolic inclusion versus substantive representation.

5.1 Demographic Mobilization Without Structural Transformation

Nigeria's 2023 elections witnessed significant youth voter registration. The Independent National Electoral Commission reported a marked increase in youth registration compared to previous cycles, with citizens aged 18 to 34 constituting a substantial share of new registrants (Ekot & Momoh, 2024). At face value, such statistics suggest democratic vitality. However, literature cautions against equating registration with influence. Adejumobi (2015) argues that electoral participation in Africa often occurs within structurally imbalanced systems where formal participation masks elite continuity. Similarly, Ekot and Momoh (2024) observe that despite high youth registration, candidate selection in major parties remained dominated by older elites. A youth activist noted:

“We queued for PVC registration believing this election would be different. But when party primaries started, it became clear that nothing fundamental had changed. Young people were mobilized to vote, not to lead.”

This aligns with Odo and Obani’s (2023) argument that youth mobilization is often instrumentalized by political elites without corresponding structural redistribution of power.

5.2 Constrained Optimism and Civic Self Efficacy

Davis and Turnbull (2024) identify a phenomenon they describe as constrained optimism. Nigerian youth express commitment to democracy despite experiencing electoral violence and institutional mistrust. This paradox is evident in narratives.

One youth polling volunteer reflected:

“We believe in democracy. That is why we endure the stress and intimidation. But we are realistic. The system protects powerful interests.”

This mirrors empirical findings that youth maintain civic self efficacy even when perceiving institutional weakness (Davis & Turnbull, 2024). Rather than apathy, what emerges is cautious engagement. Youth participation becomes an act of resistance within constrained institutional space.

The implication is significant. Democratic renewal cannot be assessed solely through turnout figures. The quality of engagement matters. If participation is driven by defensive hope rather than institutional trust, renewal remains fragile.

5.3 Economic Gatekeeping in Party Politics

One of the strongest recurring themes concerns financial barriers. Odo and Obani (2023) demonstrate that nomination fees in Nigerian major parties remain prohibitive. In 2023, expression of interest and nomination forms for major offices cost millions of naira. Such costs effectively exclude economically marginalized youth.

A youth aspirant explained:

“The age requirement changed, but the money requirement did not. It was never about age alone.”

Okoye and Tokpo (2025) argue that money politics functions as a structural filter reinforcing elite continuity. Even when youth qualify legally, they face insurmountable financial and patronage barriers. This suggests that legislative reform such as the Not Too Young to Run Act, though symbolically powerful, fails to

dismantle deeper economic structures. The contradiction becomes evident. Nigeria's democracy formally welcomes youth participation, yet economically filters them out of competitive candidacy.

5.4 Symbolic Inclusion Versus Substantive Representation

While youth visibility in campaigns and digital mobilization increased, actual electoral victories among young candidates remained limited (Ekot & Momoh, 2024). Youth were prominent in online political discourse, yet representation in legislative bodies remained modest. Adejumbi (2015) cautions that democratization processes in Africa often produce symbolic inclusion without structural redistribution. Nigeria appears to fit this pattern. Youth are celebrated as voters and mobilizers, but rarely as decision makers. This raises a deeper theoretical question. Can democracy renew itself if the demographic majority remains structurally peripheral to leadership?

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal a complex and uneasy relationship between youth political participation and democratic renewal in Nigeria. On one hand, youth engagement in voter registration, civic education, and electoral monitoring demonstrates democratic energy. On the other hand, structural barriers within party systems, economic exclusion, and elite gatekeeping prevent this energy from translating into transformative representation. This contradiction reflects broader African democratic dynamics. Adejumbi (2015) argues that electoral democracy in Africa often stabilizes procedural legitimacy without guaranteeing substantive inclusion. Nigeria's 2023 elections illustrate this tension vividly. Youth participation increased procedurally, yet structural power relations remained largely intact.

The concept of constrained optimism offers an important interpretive lens. Nigerian youth are neither apathetic nor fully empowered. They operate within constrained institutional environments, balancing hope with realism (Davis & Turnbull, 2024). Their engagement reflects resilience rather than satisfaction.

Democratic renewal requires more than legislative reform. Lowering age thresholds without reforming party financing structures perpetuates symbolic inclusion. Party nomination systems require democratization. Campaign financing transparency must

be strengthened. Without these structural changes, youth participation risks becoming cyclical mobilization rather than sustained transformation.

Therefore, youth political participation in Nigeria today represents potential democratic renewal rather than achieved renewal. The demographic majority holds transformative capacity, yet institutional architecture constrains it. If reforms address economic gatekeeping and internal party democracy, youth participation could shift from peripheral energy to structural influence. Based on this understanding, Nigeria's democratic future depends not only on how many youths vote, but on whether the system permits them to govern.

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