

Youth Inclusion and Leadership Recruitment in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: An Assessment of the "Not Too Young to Run" Policy (2018–2025)

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Abstract

The passage of the Not Too Young to Run Act in May 2018 represented the most significant legislative intervention in the history of Nigeria's Fourth Republic aimed specifically at expanding youth access to elective political office. By reducing the minimum age for the presidency from 40 to 35, the governorship from 35 to 30, the Senate from 35 to 30, and the House of Representatives and State Houses of Assembly from 30 to 25, the Act formally dismantled the highest constitutional age barriers that had historically excluded a generation of young Nigerians from direct leadership recruitment. Yet seven years after enactment and across two general election cycles, 2019 and 2023, the gap between the Act's democratic promise and its measurable outcomes in terms of actual youth representation in elected offices remains wide, contested, and insufficiently analysed. This study assesses the impact of the "Not Too Young to Run" policy on youth inclusion and leadership recruitment in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, covering the period from the Act's passage in 2018 through the post-2023 electoral landscape. This study draws on a systematic analysis of electoral data, scholarly research, civil society assessments, and policy evaluations published between 2019 and 2026 and is anchored in three theoretical frameworks. Political Opportunity Structure Theory, Elite Theory, and Social Exclusion Theory; The study evaluates the policy's strengths and documented achievements, analyses the structural, financial, and institutional weaknesses that have prevented its full realisation, examines the policy environment governing political

participation in Nigeria, and advances seven evidence-based recommendations for deepening youth inclusion in Nigeria's political leadership. Key findings include minimal but measurable improvement in youth legislative representation across the 2019 and 2023 elections, the decisive role of nomination form costs, with APC presidential forms set at ₦100 million in 2023 as the primary structural barrier to youth candidacy and the persistence of gerontocratic patronage networks that reproduce elite closure regardless of constitutional age liberalisation.

Keywords: Youth political inclusion, Not Too Young to Run Act (2018), Electoral representation (2019–2023), Structural barriers, Elite closure / gerontocracy

1.1 Introduction

Among the foundational paradoxes of Nigerian democracy is the co-existence of the world's largest youth population on the African continent and one of the most gerontocratic political leadership structures in the democratic world. Nigeria is a young country in the most fundamental demographic sense: young people aged 15 to 35 represent approximately 70 per cent of the total population, and those aged between 18 and 34 constitute 37.7 per cent of the national voter register, the single largest demographic bloc in the Nigerian electorate (Africa Practice, 2024; INEC, 2023). Yet from the inauguration of the Fourth Republic in May 1999 through successive electoral cycles, the overwhelming majority of elected political offices at federal and state levels have been occupied by politicians who are decades older than the median Nigerian citizen, and the average age of the Nigerian National Assembly has consistently remained above 50 years.

This paradox of a young electorate governed by an ageing political class has multiple causes. The Nigerian Constitution of 1999, as originally enacted, set minimum age requirements for elected offices that were among the highest of any democracy in the world; 40 years for the presidency, 35 for the Senate and governorships, and 30 for the House of Representatives and State Houses of Assembly. These constitutional thresholds, combined with the prohibitive financial costs of political candidacy, the patronage networks of political godfatherism, and the cultural norms of generational deference embedded in both Northern and Southern Nigerian political cultures, created a structural system of youth exclusion from elective office that went largely unaddressed through the first fifteen years of the Fourth Republic.

The groundswell of youth activism that characterised the mid-2010s, energised by the emergence of social media as a political mobilisation platform, the frustrations of a generation confronting mass unemployment and governance failure, and the inspiration drawn from international youth political movements, produced the #NotTooYoungToRun campaign, which from 2016 onwards systematically advocated for constitutional

amendments to reduce the age requirements for elective office. The campaign, led by civil society organisations including YIAGA Africa under the coordination of Samson Itodo, garnered unprecedented popular support; attracted international attention from the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres; and ultimately secured passage of the Not Too Young to Run Act in May 2018 following President Muhammadu Buhari's assent.

The passage of the Act was celebrated as a generational democratic milestone. UN Secretary-General Guterres described the Nigerian law as "a positive step for democracy and development" and called on other countries to follow Nigeria's example. International IDEA documented Nigeria's NTYTR Act as a model for youth political inclusion across sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the assessment of the Act's actual impact measured against the ambitious expectations of its architects and advocates presents a far more ambiguous picture. By 2023, Nigeria's president was a 70-year-old; youth representation in the House of Representatives stood at 3.92 per cent (14 of 360 seats); youth candidacy had actually declined from 34 per cent in 2019 to 28.8 per cent in 2023; and the Forum of National Youth Leaders of All Political Parties was, as recently as June 2026, calling not for inclusion but for a "transition from gerontocracy to youthocracy" (Blueprint, 2026).

This study critically examines this gap between constitutional promise and political reality. It assesses what the NTYTR Act achieved, what it failed to achieve, why it fell short of its transformative ambitions, and what policy reforms are needed to close the implementation gap.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the passage of the Not Too Young to Run Act in 2018 and two subsequent general election cycles in which the Act's provisions were operative, the structural exclusion of young Nigerians from meaningful leadership positions in elected government remains largely intact. This study identifies five dimensions of the problem.

First, constitutional age reform has not been matched by structural political finance reform. The single most powerful barrier to youth candidacy in Nigeria is not the constitutional minimum age requirement, which the Act addressed, but the cost of political participation. In the 2023 election cycle, the APC set its presidential nomination form at ₦100 million, the PDP at ₦40 million, and party nomination forms for lesser offices at millions of naira – figures that place formal political competition permanently beyond the reach of the overwhelming majority of Nigerians, particularly young people who constitute the most economically marginalised demographic. A young Nigerian earning the national minimum wage of ₦70,000 per month (as set in July 2024) would need to save their entire income for over 119 years to afford the APC presidential form alone before campaign costs, logistics, media exposure, and mobilisation expenditures (BusinessDay, 2026). This financial barrier is not addressed by the NTYTR Act, and its absence from the reform

agenda represents the most critical policy gap in Nigeria's youth political inclusion architecture.

Second, the electoral data from 2019 and 2023 confirms that formal constitutional change has produced only marginal improvements in actual youth representation. Youth representation in the House of Representatives increased from 3 per cent in 2019 to 3.92 per cent in 2023, an increase of less than one percentage point over a full electoral cycle. Youth representation in the 109-seat Senate remained negligible. Of 15,336 candidates across all categories in the 2023 elections, only 4,398 (28.6 per cent) were youth candidates, a decline from 34 per cent in 2019 (Guardian Nigeria, 2022; Yiaga Africa, 2023). These figures confirm that the NTYTR Act created necessary but grossly insufficient conditions for meaningful youth political inclusion.

Third, godfatherism and patrimonial political networks continue to determine the nomination and election of candidates in ways that systematically disadvantage young aspirants who lack connections to established political patrons. Research consistently documents that youth candidates nominated by established political parties are significantly more likely to win elections than those sponsored by newer or less established parties (Yiaga Africa / IDEA, 2023). This finding means that access to party nomination controlled by gatekeepers with financial and patronage leverage is the decisive variable in determining electoral success, and age reform alone cannot dislodge the patronage dynamics through which established elites reproduce themselves in power.

Fourth, the policy framework governing youth political participation in Nigeria lacks coherence, mandatory enforcement mechanisms, and systematic monitoring. The NTYTR Act exists in isolation from related institutional reforms: electoral law reform, political finance regulation, political party internal democracy requirements, and affirmative action for youth that would be needed to constitute a genuinely transformative policy architecture for youth political inclusion. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) does not systematically track or report on youth candidacy by age cohort in its official results documentation, limiting accountability for youth representation outcomes.

Fifth, the cultural and institutional environment of Nigerian politics continues to privilege age, seniority, and patriarchal authority over merit, innovation, and representational equity in ways that a single legislative intervention cannot easily dislodge. Young Nigerians report widespread experiences of political marginalisation, including being dismissed as inexperienced, co-opted as instruments of established politicians rather than independent leaders, and confronted with cultural norms that frame political leadership as the exclusive preserve of elders.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the impact of the Not Too Young to Run Act (formally the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Fifth Alteration) Act No. 17 of 2018) on youth inclusion and leadership recruitment in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The temporal scope covers the period from the Act's passage in May 2018 through the post-2023 general election assessment period, with reference to developments up to June 2026, where available.

Thematically, the study covers five domains: (i) the legislative history, content, and stated objectives of the NTYTR Act; (ii) electoral data on youth candidacy and representation in the 2019 and 2023 general elections; (iii) the structural, financial, cultural, and institutional barriers that have limited the Act's transformative impact; (iv) the policy framework including the Electoral Act 2022, the INEC regulatory framework, and political party regulations within which the Act operates; and (v) comparative perspectives on youth political inclusion from other democratic systems that illuminate what additional policy instruments have proven effective beyond minimum age reduction. The study relies on secondary research methodology, drawing on electoral data, peer-reviewed scholarship, civil society assessments, and policy documents.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study's significance extends across scholarly, policy, and civic dimensions. Academically, the study contributes to the growing literature on youth political participation in Africa and specifically in Nigeria's Fourth Republic by providing a comprehensive, multi-dimensional assessment of the NTYTR Act that integrates electoral data, political economy analysis, and theoretical frameworks in a way that existing single-focus studies have not achieved. The study situates Nigeria's youth inclusion challenge within the broader global literature on political opportunity structures and elite theory, providing comparative analytical grounding for understanding why constitutional reform alone is insufficient to produce genuine youth political empowerment.

For policymakers including the National Assembly, INEC, political parties, and civil society organisations, the study provides an evidence-based diagnosis of the structural gaps in Nigeria's youth inclusion policy architecture, alongside specific recommendations for legislative, regulatory, and institutional reforms that would address the root causes of youth political exclusion rather than merely its constitutional symptoms. For the international community, including the United Nations, the African Union, and bilateral development partners invested in Nigeria's democratic development, the study provides a rigorous assessment of the limits of legislative reform as a tool for democratic inclusion in contexts characterised by patronage-based political finance.

For Nigerian young people themselves, the 70 per cent of the population who constitute both the democratic majority and the primary victims of gerontocratic political exclusion, the study provides scholarly validation of their political aspirations and a mapped pathway toward the institutional reforms that could make them genuinely achievable. As the Forum of National Youth Leaders noted on Democracy Day 2026, Nigerian youths are no longer asking for inclusion; they are demanding leadership transition. This study provides the analytical foundations for understanding what structural changes that transition requires.

1.5. Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

- i. To examine the legislative history, content, and stated objectives of the Not Too Young to Run Act of 2018 within the context of Nigeria's Fourth Republic political governance framework.
- ii. To assess the measurable impact of the NTYTR Act on youth candidacy rates, electoral outcomes, and representation in elected offices across the 2019 and 2023 general election cycles.
- iii. To identify and analyse the structural, financial, institutional, and cultural barriers that have limited the Act's transformative impact on youth political inclusion and leadership recruitment.

1.6. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What were the stated objectives of the Not Too Young to Run Act of 2018, and what constitutional and legislative changes did it introduce to Nigeria's political governance framework?
- ii. To what measurable extent has the NTYTR Act improved youth candidacy rates, electoral success, and representation in elected offices across the 2019 and 2023 general election cycles?
- iii. What are the principal structural, financial, institutional, and cultural barriers that have prevented the Act from producing its intended transformative impact on youth inclusion and leadership recruitment in Nigeria?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Youth Political Exclusion in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Historical Context

The systematic exclusion of young Nigerians from elective political office is one of the most consistently documented patterns in Nigeria's Fourth Republic political landscape. Research spanning the full democratic period since 1999 confirms that while young people have consistently constituted the majority of registered voters, representing 51 percent of

the 84 million registered voters in 2019 and 37.7 percent of the 93.5 million registered voters in 2023, they have occupied a small and declining fraction of elective offices (INEC, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023). Research by Ibezim (2019) identified lack of understanding of political processes, restricted financial capacity, social marginalization, unemployment, and absence of equipment and resources as the primary barriers that young Nigerians faced in pursuing political leadership. Offiong (2018) further argued that Nigerian youth leadership aspirations were additionally impeded by ethnic fragmentation that prevented the formation of a coherent youth political bloc capable of challenging entrenched elite interests.

The structural foundations of this exclusion were embedded in the 1999 Constitution's minimum age provisions, which, until 2018, set a minimum presidential age of 40, placing Nigeria among the most age-restrictive democracies in the world alongside China (45) and Italy (50) and well above the global average among mature democracies (Financial Nigeria, 2022). These constitutional age floors, combined with an electoral financing system with no effective caps on nomination form costs, created a dual exclusionary mechanism that filtered the leadership recruitment pool on both age and wealth, precisely the two dimensions on which young Nigerians were most disadvantaged.

2.1.1 The “Not Too Young To Run” Campaign and the 2018 Act

The legislative pathway to the NTYTR Act of 2018 is itself an important story of youth civic agency operating within a system structured against youth interests. The campaign was launched by YIAGA Africa (Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement) and its executive director Samson Itodo in 2016, drawing inspiration from the global #NotTooYoungToRun movement coordinated by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Restless Development. The campaign employed a combination of digital advocacy, petition, public protests, and direct legislative engagement that represented one of the most successful youth civil society campaigns in Nigerian democratic history.

The bill was sponsored in the House of Representatives by Hon. Tony Nwulo and in the Senate by Sen. Abdulazeez Nyako; passed the National Assembly in 2017; and received the support of the majority of state Houses of Assembly required for constitutional amendment. President Buhari assented to the Act on 31 May 2018. The Act attracted international attention: UN Secretary-General António Guterres cited it as a model for other countries, and UNDP produced documentation of the campaign as a case study in youth-led democratic reform. The 2019 elections became the first test of the Act's impact on youth candidacy and representation.

2.1.2 Electoral Performance of Youth Candidates in 2019 and 2023

The empirical picture of youth electoral performance in the two post-NTYTR election cycles presents a consistent pattern of modest but meaningful improvement in legislative representation alongside a persistent absence from executive positions. In the 2019 elections, the first cycle following the Act's passage, youth candidacy was 34 per cent of total candidates, but actual youth victories in the National Assembly remained minimal, approximately 3 per cent of House of Representatives seats (Obani, 2023; RUJMASS, 2023).

In the 2023 elections, youth candidacy declined to 28.8 per cent of total candidates, a counter-intuitive reduction despite the Act's presence, but youth representation in the House of Representatives improved marginally to 3.92 per cent (14 of 360 seats), and youth representation in state assemblies increased from 8.9 per cent to 9.2 per cent (Yiaga Africa / IDEA, 2023; ISS Africa, 2023). Of 15,336 candidates across all offices in 2023, 4,398 were youth candidates, of whom 43.2 per cent were direct beneficiaries of the NTYTR Act in the sense that they were standing for offices for which they would previously have been constitutionally ineligible (Guardian Nigeria, 2022). The Labour Party's emergence as a major electoral force in the 2023 elections, winning approximately 40 National Assembly seats, created new pathways for some youth candidates outside the APC-PDP duopoly.

Samson Itodo's post-election assessment, published by International IDEA, identified three structural trends explaining the gap between the Act's promise and its outcomes: party nomination structures that systematically favoured candidates for lower legislative offices at the state level over executive or federal offices; the paradox that higher youth voter registration did not translate into higher youth candidate turnout; and the decisive advantage of candidates sponsored by established parties over those from emerging parties, a factor that disadvantaged independent-minded youth candidates without major party patronage (IDEA, 2023).

Okojie (2024), applying elite theory to assess the NTYTR Act's outcomes in the 2023 elections, concluded that the persistence of elite-controlled party structures, exclusionary political finance, and gerontocratic patronage networks meant that constitutional age liberalisation had produced cosmetic rather than structural change in the character of Nigeria's political leadership class. The assessment by Egbunike (2025), published by Springer Nature, reached a more nuanced verdict, documenting historic wins by specific young candidates who unseated incumbents in 2023 while acknowledging that systemic change remained elusive at the aggregate level.

2.1.3 Structural Barriers: Political Finance, Godfatherism, and Party Structures

The political finance dimension of youth exclusion has emerged as the central analytical focus of post-NTYTR scholarship on youth political participation in Nigeria. The APC's

₦100 million presidential nomination form in 2023, the PDP's ₦40 million equivalent, and the multi-million naira forms for lesser offices created a financial barrier that rendered the constitutional age reduction almost irrelevant for the majority of potential young candidates (BusinessDay, 2026). Abubakar and Shadrack (2023) systematically documented the escalating costs of nomination forms from 2015 through 2023, demonstrating that real form costs had grown at rates far above inflation and income growth, progressively narrowing the viable candidate pool to a small wealthy elite regardless of age.

The complementary role of godfatherism in structuring youth political exclusion is documented across the Fourth Republic literature. Young political aspirants who lack personal wealth typically have no viable route to candidacy except through patron sponsorship, a dependency relationship that compromises their independence and perpetuates rather than disrupts the gerontocratic power structure. Omotola (2025) situates this dynamic within a broader political economy of elite closure in which rentier state logic and patrimonial networks combine to reproduce oligarchic control over political leadership recruitment across electoral cycles. Research published in the TWIST Journal (2025) confirms that youth candidacy hardly inspires youth voter turnout, suggesting that the political mobilisation logic of the NTYTR Act has not yet created the feedback loop between youth candidates and youth voters that would be needed to generate self-sustaining momentum for youth political leadership.

2.1.3 Comparative Perspectives: What Works Beyond Age Reform

Comparative democratic experience illuminates the additional policy instruments that have proven effective in promoting youth political representation beyond constitutional age reduction. Countries with the highest rates of youth political representation, including Norway, New Zealand, Iceland, and Finland, combine low age requirements with strong political finance regulations; gender and youth quotas in political party candidate lists; strong party youth wings with genuine leadership development pipelines; public funding of political parties conditioned on diversity requirements; and strong independent electoral commissions with robust enforcement powers (Krook and Nugent, 2018; International IDEA, 2023).

Within Africa, Rwanda's constitutionally mandated youth and gender quotas have produced among the most diverse parliaments on the continent. Kenya's Youth Enterprise Development Fund and Uwezo Fund provided economic foundations for youth civic participation. Ghana's relatively lower nomination form costs have contributed to higher youth candidacy rates. These comparative examples consistently demonstrate that constitutional age reform, without complementary political finance regulation, quota measures, and party internal democracy requirements, produces marginal rather than transformative change in youth political representation.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two theoretical frameworks that together provide a comprehensive analytical architecture for examining the relationship between the NTYTR Act, youth inclusion, and leadership recruitment.

2.2.1 Elite Theory

Elite theory, originating in the works of Pareto (1901), Mosca (1939), and Michels (1911), whose "iron law of oligarchy" holds that organisations inevitably develop oligarchic leadership regardless of their initial democratic intentions, provides the analytical framework for understanding how entrenched political elites reproduce their dominance despite formal democratic reforms. In Michels's formulation, organisational complexity, leadership specialisation, and the tactical advantages of incumbency combine to ensure that those already in power maintain control over succession processes even within organisations (like political parties) nominally committed to competitive internal democracy.

The application of elite theory to Nigeria's political leadership recruitment is documented with particular force by Omotola (2025), who argues that Nigeria's Fourth Republic has reproduced an "iron law of gerontocracy" through the mechanisms of patrimonial politics, financial gatekeeping, and institutional control over nomination processes. The APC's and PDP's consistently highest nomination form costs, their tendency to nominate incumbent or established candidates even when the NTYTR Act created eligibility space for younger candidates, and the dominance of "recycled" political figures across electoral cycles all conform to the Elite Theory prediction. The NTYTR Act sought to breach this elite closure through constitutional fiat, but elite theory would predict, and the electoral evidence confirms, that elite networks would adapt their exclusionary practices to the new formal framework through financial and patronage mechanisms rather than constitutional ones.

2.2.2 Social Exclusion Theory

Social Exclusion Theory, developed in the European sociological tradition by Lenoir (1974) and extended to political contexts by Room (1995) and Silver (1994), analyses how groups are systematically excluded from participation in the mainstream social, economic, and political life of a community through a combination of structural disadvantages that are mutually reinforcing. Applied to youth political exclusion in Nigeria, social exclusion theory identifies three mutually reinforcing exclusionary mechanisms: economic exclusion, the financial barriers of nomination costs and campaign expenses that young people cannot meet; institutional exclusion, the internal party structures, patronage networks, and nomination processes that gatekeep access to formal candidacy; and cultural

exclusion, the norms of generational deference and the "lack of experience" narratives that delegitimise youth political leadership regardless of individual capacity.

Social Exclusion Theory directs the study's analysis toward the multi-dimensional character of youth political exclusion, emphasising that addressing one dimension, which is constitutional age, without addressing the others, which are financial, institutional, and cultural, produces incomplete liberation. This theoretical insight underpins the study's central analytical argument: that the NTYTR Act addressed the constitutional dimension of youth political exclusion while leaving the other three dimensions largely intact, producing a constitutionally reformed system that continues to exclude youth through the financial, institutional, and cultural mechanisms that the Act did not touch.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in document analysis and systematic secondary research synthesis. A qualitative design is appropriate for a study whose primary objectives such as understanding the political dynamics of youth exclusion, evaluating the gap between legislative intent and electoral reality, and generating policy recommendations, require interpretive, contextual, and theoretically informed analysis rather than primarily statistical measurement. Amin (2025) affirms that qualitative research designs are particularly appropriate for studies examining political institutions, policy effectiveness, and the social processes through which power is distributed and contested.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected from five primary categories of sources. First, legislative and constitutional documents; the text of the Not Too Young to Run Act (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Fifth Alteration Act No. 17 of 2018), the 1999 Constitution as amended, and the Electoral Act 2022. Second, electoral data: INEC official results documents for the 2019 and 2023 general elections, Yiaga Africa electoral monitoring reports, International IDEA publications, and Africa Check factual analyses of candidate age data. Third, peer-reviewed scholarship: articles from ResearchGate, [Academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu), Springer Nature, RUJMASS, and African Journal of Humanities and Contemporary Education Research published between 2019 and 2026. Fourth, civil society and institutional assessments: reports from Yiaga Africa, International IDEA, the African Centre for Leadership Strategy and Development, and the Forum of National Youth Leaders of All Political Parties. Fifth, credible policy analysis and media sources: BusinessDay, Blueprint, ISS Africa, Financial Nigeria, and Africa Practice. All sources

were evaluated for reliability, institutional standing, and direct relevance before incorporation.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a combination of content analysis applied to legislative documents, electoral reports, and policy documents and thematic synthesis applied to the scholarly and civil society literature. Content analysis systematically identified the specific provisions, mechanisms, and stated objectives of the NTYTR Act, enabling structured comparison with electoral outcome data. Thematic synthesis organised empirical findings from multiple studies around the study's five research questions and three theoretical frameworks, enabling an integrated analytical account. Electoral data on youth candidacy and representation were tabulated where quantitative comparisons were analytically necessary, though the study's primary mode of analysis remains qualitative and interpretive.

4. Major Findings

4.1 Finding 1: The NTYTR Act Produced a Measurable but Modest Improvement in Youth Legislative Representation

The most directly measurable impact of the NTYTR Act is a modest but consistent improvement in youth representation in the legislative branch across the two post-Act elections. Youth representation in the House of Representatives increased from approximately 3 per cent in 2019 to 3.92 per cent (14 seats) in 2023. Youth representation in state Houses of Assembly increased from 8.9 per cent in 2019 to 9.2 per cent in 2023. Of 15,336 candidates in 2023, 4,398 (28.6 per cent) were youth, of whom 43.2 per cent directly benefited from the Act's age reductions (Yiaga Africa, 2023; Guardian Nigeria, 2022). Young politicians also produced historic upsets in 2023, unseating several long-serving incumbents, demonstrating that youth candidacy can translate into electoral success when party nominations are secured and financial resources are available (IDEA, 2023).

4.2 Finding 2: Youth Candidacy Declined Between 2019 and 2023, Indicating Structural Deterioration

Counter-intuitively, youth candidacy as a percentage of total candidates declined from 34 per cent in 2019 to 28.8 per cent in 2023 despite the Act's provisions having been operative throughout both cycles (ISS Africa, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023). This decline suggests that escalating nomination form costs in the 2023 cycle, which saw APC presidential forms reach ₦100 million, actively deterred youth candidacy in aggregate even while the NTYTR Act formally preserved constitutional eligibility. The decline in youth candidacy despite

constitutional reform is a finding of major significance: it confirms that the structural environment of political participation deteriorated in ways that offset the Act's eligibility gains.

4.3 Finding 3: Political Finance Is the Decisive Structural Barrier to Youth Candidacy

The evidence overwhelmingly identifies the cost of political participation, particularly nomination form costs set unilaterally by political parties, as the single most powerful barrier to youth political inclusion, operating entirely outside the NTYTR Act's sphere of intervention. With APC presidential forms at ₦100 million and PDP forms at ₦40 million in 2023, and with less than 1 per cent of Nigerians earning above ₦1 million monthly, the financial threshold for presidential candidacy is structurally inaccessible to virtually all young Nigerians regardless of their constitutional eligibility (BusinessDay, 2026; Abubakar & Shadrack, 2023). Research by Yiaga Africa confirmed that political finance reform is "an urgent necessity to ensure the political space is accessible to all persons regardless of age, economic class, tribe, and creed", a conclusion that positions political finance as the most critical unresolved challenge in Nigeria's youth inclusion architecture.

4.4 Finding 4: Gerontocratic Patronage Networks Continue to Determine Leadership Recruitment

Elite theory is confirmed by the evidence: Nigeria's major political parties, APC and PDP, consistently nominated fewer youth candidates than smaller parties, despite being the parties whose nominations are most decisive for electoral success. Research confirmed that youth candidates nominated by established parties were significantly more likely to win elections than those sponsored by newer parties, creating a paradox where access to the parties most resistant to youth inclusion is simultaneously the most important determinant of electoral success (IDEA, 2023; RUJMASS, 2023). The iron law of gerontocracy, operating through party internal hierarchies, patronage obligations, and the selection preferences of political godfathers, has proved highly resistant to constitutional age reform.

5. Discussion of Findings

The six findings of this study converge on a central analytical conclusion: the NTYTR Act represents a necessary but profoundly insufficient response to Nigeria's youth political exclusion challenge. Constitutional age liberalisation is a prerequisite for youth political inclusion, but it is only one of at least four dimensions such as constitutional, financial, institutional, and cultural of the exclusionary structure that young Nigerians face. By addressing only the constitutional dimension while leaving the others intact, the Act created a formally reformed system that continues to reproduce youth exclusion through the financial, institutional, and cultural mechanisms it did not touch.

Political Opportunity Structure Theory provides the most direct analytical lens for understanding this outcome. The Act formally opened the constitutional opportunity structure removing the age ceiling. But the financial opportunity structure (₦100 million nomination forms), the party institutional opportunity structure (godfatherism and patronage nomination), and the cultural opportunity structure (gerontocratic norms and "inexperience" narratives) remained firmly closed. POS Theory predicts that partial opening of political opportunities produces partial rather than transformative participation gains precisely the outcome documented in the 2019 and 2023 electoral data. The marginal improvements in youth legislative representation (3 per cent to 3.92 per cent in the House of Representatives) represent the quantum of change produced by opening the constitutional opportunity structure alone.

Elite Theory's predictive power in this context is substantial. Michels's iron law of oligarchy would predict exactly the observed pattern: established political elites, confronted with constitutional reform that threatened their dominance, adapted their exclusionary practices to the new formal framework by operating through financial and patronage mechanisms rather than constitutional ones. The escalation of APC nomination forms to ₦100 million in 2023 a figure that no young person without patronage could afford represents precisely this elite adaptation, using financial gatekeeping as a substitute for constitutional gatekeeping. The NTYTR Act removed one lock from the door of political leadership, and the governing elite promptly installed a more expensive one.

Social Exclusion Theory's multi-dimensional framework reveals the depth of the policy reform challenge. The mutually reinforcing character of economic, institutional, and cultural exclusion means that addressing any single dimension produces only incremental gains because the other dimensions immediately constrain the impact of any partial reform. This has important implications for policy design: effective youth political inclusion requires a comprehensive, multi-dimensional policy package that addresses financial barriers through political finance regulation, institutional barriers through party internal democracy requirements and quota measures, and cultural barriers through sustained civic education and leadership development programming. Piecemeal reform of which the NTYTR Act is the primary example will continue to produce piecemeal results.

The finding that youth civic mobilisation has outpaced youth leadership recruitment presents both an opportunity and a warning. The generations that organised #EndSARS, drove the Obidient movement, and are now demanding "Youthocracy" rather than mere inclusion possess the political energy, digital capabilities, and democratic aspirations that could fundamentally transform Nigerian governance if the formal political system creates viable pathways for channelling that energy into electoral leadership. The warning is that if formal politics continues to be inaccessible to young Nigerians through financial and structural barriers, that energy may increasingly flow into extra-electoral protest rather than

institutionalised democratic participation with unpredictable consequences for Nigeria's democratic stability.

5.1. Summary

This study assessed the impact of the Not Too Young to Run Act of 2018 on youth inclusion and leadership recruitment in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, covering the period from the Act's passage through the post-2023 electoral landscape. Drawing on electoral data, peer-reviewed scholarship, civil society assessments, and policy documents, and grounded in political opportunity structure theory, elite theory, and social exclusion theory, the study identified six major findings.

These findings confirmed a modest but measurable improvement in youth legislative representation (3 per cent to 3.92 per cent in the House of Representatives) across the 2019 and 2023 elections; a paradoxical decline in youth candidacy from 34 per cent to 28.8 per cent between the two cycles; the decisive role of political finance, particularly the ₦100 million APC presidential nomination form, as the primary structural barrier to youth candidacy; the persistence of gerontocratic patronage networks operating through party nomination processes; the absence of complementary policy architecture for youth inclusion beyond constitutional age reform; and the significant gap between youth civic mobilisation and youth leadership representation in formal political structures.

The theoretical analysis confirmed that the Act addressed only the constitutional dimension of a multi-dimensional exclusion structure, producing partial rather than transformative change in youth political representation. Seven evidence-based policy recommendations are discussed below.

5.2 Conclusion

The Not Too Young to Run Act of 2018 stands as a genuine and historic democratic achievement, the product of sustained youth civic advocacy that successfully amended Nigeria's constitution to remove the highest age barriers to political leadership in the country's history. The Act demonstrated that young Nigerians could mobilise, organise, and achieve legislative change, and in doing so, it established an important precedent for youth civic agency in Nigeria's democratic system.

But the Act's constitutional achievement has not been matched by commensurate change in the structural landscape of youth political inclusion. Seven years after its passage, 70 per cent of Nigeria's population remains substantially excluded from its political leadership by financial barriers, patronage gatekeeping, and cultural norms that the Act did not address. The Forum of National Youth Leaders of All Political Parties, on Nigeria's Democracy Day in June 2026, captured this frustration precisely: Nigerian youths are no longer asking for inclusion or representation; they are asking for transition, for

"Youthocracy" rather than gerontocracy. This demand reflects both the Act's achievement (creating the constitutional basis for that aspiration) and its limitation (failing to create the structural conditions for its realisation).

The path from constitutional eligibility to actual political leadership runs through political finance reform, party internal democracy, civic education, and the sustained dismantling of patronage networks that reproduce elite closure across generations. Nigeria has taken the first step with the NTYTR Act. The much longer journey that remains is the construction of the full policy architecture such as financial, institutional, cultural, and civic, within which constitutional eligibility can become genuine democratic inclusion. The urgency of that journey is not merely political. It is developmental: a country that denies its largest and most energetic demographic cohort meaningful access to its leadership structures is not only failing its young citizens; it is squandering the most important resource it has for its own future.

5.3 Policy Recommendations

5.3.1 Legislate Mandatory Caps on Political Party Nomination Form Costs

The National Assembly should urgently amend the Electoral Act 2022 to introduce legally binding caps on the cost of expression of interest and nomination forms for all elective offices in Nigeria. These caps should be set at levels that reflect the economic realities of the median Nigerian not the financial capacity of the political elite. Specifically, presidential nomination forms should not exceed ₦10 million; governorship and senatorial forms should not exceed ₦5 million; House of Representatives and state assembly forms should not exceed ₦1 million. INEC should be empowered to audit, enforce, and penalise violation of these caps, with cancellation of nominations and deregistration of parties as available sanctions. This single reform would do more to advance genuine youth political inclusion than any conceivable constitutional amendment.

5.3.2 Establish a Youth Candidate Campaign Finance Fund

The federal government, in collaboration with the Independent National Electoral Commission, should establish a Youth Candidate Campaign Finance Fund, providing matching grants or soft loans to verified youth candidates (18 to 35) for approved electoral expenses, including nomination fees, campaign materials, and civic outreach. The Fund should be administered by INEC with transparent criteria, audited annually, and specifically structured to reach youth candidates from economically marginalised backgrounds. International development partners, including UNDP, USAID, and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, should be engaged as potential co-funders, given the clear alignment of youth political inclusion with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

5.3.3 Mandate Youth Representation Quotas in Party Candidate Lists

The Electoral Act should be amended to require all political parties to field a minimum of 30 per cent youth candidates (aged 18 to 35) across their total candidate lists for any general election, with meaningful sanctions including forfeiture of party registration and election funding for non-compliance. Parties should additionally be required to demonstrate, through their candidate list composition, that a minimum of 20 per cent of their candidates for National Assembly seats are youth. These quota provisions should complement, not substitute, the NTYTR Act's age liberalisation provisions. International evidence from Norway, Rwanda, and New Zealand confirms that candidate list quotas are among the most reliably effective instruments for increasing the representation of under-represented groups in elected institutions.

5.3.4 Strengthen INEC's Youth Political Inclusion Monitoring Mandate

The Independent National Electoral Commission should be mandated by law to systematically collect, analyse, and publicly report disaggregated data on youth candidacy and representation in all elections, covering candidate age profiles by party, office type, and geopolitical zone; youth voter registration and turnout rates; and trends in youth representation over successive election cycles. This data infrastructure would provide the accountability foundation for evidence-based policy improvement, enable civil society monitoring of progress against youth inclusion benchmarks, and support INEC's engagement with political parties on youth inclusion compliance. Currently, the absence of systematic youth disaggregation in INEC's official results data is itself a governance gap that obscures the scale of the representation deficit.

5.3.5 Reform Party Internal Democracy to Democratise Candidate Nomination

The National Assembly and the Electoral Act should mandate that all political parties conduct transparent, genuinely competitive, and financially accessible primaries for all candidate nominations, with INEC empowered to monitor, certify, and, if necessary, nullify nominations conducted in violation of statutory internal democracy requirements. Party constitutions should be required to include dedicated provisions for youth candidate development programmes, youth wings with genuine decision-making authority, and youth representation on party executive committees. The Interparty Advisory Council (IPAC) should facilitate sector-wide adoption of a Youth Political Inclusion Charter, committing member parties to concrete annual targets for youth candidacy and youth party leadership positions.

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