



# Youth Political Participation: Obstacles and Pathways to Increased Youth Engagement in the Nigerian Political Process

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## Abstract

This study explores the obstacles and pathways to increased youth engagement in the Nigerian political process focusing on the constraints to youth political participation and the political awareness of young Nigerians. Using semi-structured interviews, a varied sample of 30 youth (18 males and 12 females) from various regions of the country, residing in Lagos, participated in the study. The research identifies key barriers to political participation, including socioeconomic challenges, low political awareness, political disillusionment, lack of access to political platforms, and systemic corruption. The study also uncovered pathways that could facilitate greater youth involvement, such as improved civic education, increased use of social media for political mobilization, youth-targeted policies, and mentorship opportunities within political organizations. Participants highlighted the importance of youth inclusion in decision-making processes and reforms aimed at addressing youth-specific concerns. The findings suggest that, despite the obstacles, there is significant potential for increased youth engagement in Nigerian politics if structural changes and targeted interventions are implemented. This research contributes to the discourse on youth empowerment and democratic participation in emerging democracies.

## Keywords

Youth Participation, Political Awareness, Socioeconomic Challenges, Governance, Political Engagement

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the struggle for liberation from tyrannical leaders and oppressive laws has often been championed by the youth. Nigeria is no exception to this pattern. However, contemporary Nigeria presents a stark contrast to this historical narrative, as youth political participation has significantly declined in the post-independence era. Despite numerous promises from successive political leaders and policymakers, youth development in Nigeria has not received the necessary attention. This neglect has resulted in a substantial portion of the youth population being unemployed, unskilled, and impoverished, rendering them vulnerable to anti-social behavior and violence due to a lack of socioeconomic opportunities (Dike & Dike, 2017).

The marginalization of Nigerian youth in the political sphere is evident in their widespread disillusionment with the political system. Many young Nigerians have become disenchanted with politics, perceiving it as an arena where their voices are neither heard nor valued. This disillusionment has led to a significant withdrawal from active political participation, further perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and disenfranchisement (Ibrahim & Egwu, 2020). The failure to

engage the youth in the political process not only undermines democratic values but also hinders the nation's potential for progress and development.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to explore the constraints to youth political participation in Nigeria and identify practical solutions to enhance youth engagement in the political process. By examining the barriers to participation, including economic challenges, sociopolitical obstacles, and cultural factors, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Additionally, the study will reveal the level of political awareness among Nigerian youth and its impact on their political engagement. Through this analysis, the research intends to offer actionable recommendations to foster a more inclusive and participatory political environment for Nigerian youth.

## **A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF NIGERIAN YOUTH IN POLITICS**

The history of Nigeria is replete with the contributions made by youth in the emancipation of the nation from British colonial rule, culminating in the country's independence on October 1, 1960. Notable figures such as Herbert Macaulay, Ernest Ikoli, Chief Hezekiah Oladipo Davis, James Churchill Vaughan, Oba Samuel Akinsanya, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Tafawa Balewa, Obafemi Awolowo, and Chief Anthony Enahoro (Arifalo, 1986; Heaton, 2024), who were in their youth during this period, played significant roles in Nigeria's journey to independence. For instance, Anthony Enahoro was only twenty-one years old when he moved the motion for Nigeria's independence, and Yakubu Gowon became Nigeria's Head of State at twenty-nine years old, serving from 1966 to 1975 (Onuoha, 2008; Ojo, 2017). The struggle for self-rule was greatly assisted by the formation of the first national party, the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), in 1934, founded by James Churchill Vaughan, Ernest Ikoli, Hezekiah Oladipo Davies, and Samuel Akinsanya (Hensbroek, 2017; Reeves, 2017). The NYM aimed to achieve national unity and eradicate tribal and ethnic discriminations among Nigerian tribes.

Despite Nigeria's independence paving the way for democracy in the 1980s and 1990s, the objectives of these nationalists remain unfulfilled. Ethnic-based politics continues to divide the country, contributing to tensions, distrust, and sometimes conflicts among various ethnic groups (Ojo, 2015; Otu, 2022; Agbede & Oparinde, 2024). The youth are often the most affected, as they are vulnerable and easily manipulated into participating in violence and destruction caused by ethnic rivalries (Akinyetun, 2024). These persistent conflicts have the potential to impede the socio-economic and political development of the nation (Adamu and Ocheni, 2016; Okeke & Idike, 2016).

Nigeria, with a burgeoning youth population, has seen fluctuating participation levels in politics among its younger citizens. According to the National Population Commission (2019), youths (ages 15-35) constitute approximately 53% of the total population, indicating a significant demographic that could influence political dynamics. Despite their numerical strength, youth engagement in politics remains relatively low. Several authors reveal that a low significant number of Nigerian youths expressed interest in political activities, with barriers such as unemployment, lack of political education, and distrust in the political system contributing to their apathy (Kofi & Ibanga (2018; Onyenachi, 2018; Erubami, Bebenimibo, & Ohaja, 2021; Amedu & Oginni, 2023). Additionally, the 2019 Afrobarometer survey indicated that just 20% of youths were registered members of a political party, underscoring the gap between potential political influence and actual participation.

The underrepresentation of Nigerian youths in national parliament further exemplifies their limited political engagement. For instance, out of the 469 members of the National Assembly, only a small fraction is under the age of 35 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The 'Not Too Young to Run' Act, signed in 2018, was a legislative attempt to lower the age requirements for elected positions, aiming to enhance youth representation (Krook & Nugent, 2018; Odo & Obani, 2023; Semiu, 2024). However, despite this legal reform, the 2019 general elections saw minimal increase in youth candidacy and successful election outcomes. Shadrack (2023) argues that structural challenges, including financial constraints and the dominance of established political elites, continue to hinder substantial youth participation and representation in Nigeria's political landscape.

According to Worldometer (2024), Nigeria has the largest youth population globally and a median age of 17.2 years. Approximately 70% of Nigeria's population is under 30, and 42% is under the age of 15. The Nigerian National Youth Policy (2024) defines youth as individuals aged between 15 and 35 years. And as specified in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the electoral body of Nigeria, a person is eligible to vote from 18 years. Current estimates indicate that this demographic makes up about 33% of Nigeria's total population, which is projected to be around 228 million as of 2024, represents 2.78% of the global population (Worldometer, 2024). Despite this large youth population, political participation among the youth is minimal, with only about zero to five percent involvement in party membership and national parliament. The impact of this on Nigeria's political landscape is evident in the nation's developmental trajectory since gaining independence.

After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's young nationalists who fought for self-rule assumed political offices during the first (1960–1979) and second republics (1979–1983). However, over time, greed led to a hegemonic hold on power, resulting in the recycling of older politicians (Omotosho, 2018). The youth are often used as political thugs and discarded post-elections, leading to their disenchantment with politics. Consequently, the Nigerian political scene has been dominated for over 30 years by the same cycle of politicians who have done little to improve the country's socioeconomic conditions (Adichie, 2011; Gbemisola, 2014; Uhunmwungho & Urhohide, 2013).

The disenfranchisement of youth from mainstream politics has led to various responses. From calls for secession by Biafra youth in the southeast (Johnson & Olaniyan, 2017; Onuoha, 2017) and the declaration of the Oduduwa Republic in the southwest (Adesoji, 2017), to agitations by Arewa youth in the north and Niger Delta youth for resource

control and self-governance (Raimi, Bieh & Zorbari, 2017; Osaghae, Ikelegbe, Olarinmoye & Okhomina, 2007; Babatunde, Norafidah & Tapiwa, 2016), and the recent "Not Too Young To Run" bill advocating for greater youth inclusion in governance (YIAGA, 2016; Inyang, 2017), the youth have consistently called for political restructuring. While much of the blame has been placed on the older generation for their reluctance to relinquish power, the youth have also faced criticism for their apathy towards political participation.

### **SOCIOECONOMIC BARRIERS TO YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

Political participation is a fundamental component of democratic governance, allowing citizens to influence decision-making processes. In Nigeria, youth political participation is crucial for the nation's democratic development and stability. It takes those in the high-income bracket and those with huge political clout to play real politics in the country. The hegemonic hold of some powerful people in the society on electoral matters and elective posts have also placed a stranglehold on political interference and barred the youth from active political participation which has led to the retrogressing participation of Nigerian youth in politics. As Adichie (2011) noted, about 70% of Nigeria's population is under 35, yet for decades, there has been a persistent political culture of neglecting the youth, who have, in turn, become disconnected from the political process.

Notably, economic marginalization is a primary barrier to youth political participation in Nigeria. Many young Nigerians face high unemployment rates and limited access to economic resources, which restrict their ability to engage in political activities. Omotosho (2023) argues that economic hardship undermines the capacity of youths to participate in politics, as they often prioritize immediate survival over long-term political engagement. Additionally, the high cost of running for political office, including campaign expenses and party nomination fees, is exorbitant for many young Nigerians (Olorunmola, 2016; Obani, 2023). Thus, only those with substantial financial resources or connections to wealthier political patrons can afford to participate actively in politics. This economic vulnerability limits their ability to fund political campaigns, join political organizations, or attend political events (Abonyi, et al., 2023; Uchechukwu, et al., 2023; Davis and Turnbull, 2024).

The financial demands associated with political participation in Nigeria are prohibitively high for many youths (Obani, 2023; Zhou & Tandi, 2023). According to Olorunmola (2016), the cost of running for political office, including campaign expenses, party nomination fees, and lobbying costs, is beyond the reach of most young Nigerians. This economic barrier effectively excludes them from the political arena, reinforcing a system dominated by older, wealthier individuals who can afford these expenses (Yagboyaju & Simbine, 2020; Abubakar & Shadrack, 2023).

Political clientelism exacerbates economic barriers to youth political participation. In Nigeria, political patronage systems often require financial contributions or favors in exchange for political support or opportunities. As Anugwom (2020) points out, young people, who are typically economically disadvantaged, find it difficult to navigate these patronage networks. Their economic dependency on older politicians for jobs and financial support further discourages independent political involvement and perpetuates their marginalization.

Socioeconomic inequality also affects youth political participation through disparities in access to education. Obiagu, Machie, and Ndubuisi, (2023) highlights that educational attainment is strongly correlated with political participation, as education enhances political awareness and engagement (Le & Nguyen, 2021; Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). However, economic barriers prevent many Nigerian youths from accessing quality education, thereby reducing their political efficacy and participation. The intersection of economic disadvantage and educational deprivation creates a cycle of marginalization that is difficult to break.

While economic barriers are significant, some studies suggest that promoting youth entrepreneurship can enhance political participation. Omeje, Jideofor, and Ugwu, (2020) argue that economic empowerment through entrepreneurship can provide youths with the financial independence needed to engage in politics. By fostering entrepreneurial skills and providing access to capital, policies aimed at economic empowerment could mitigate the economic barriers to political participation (Abubakar, 2021; Okafor, et al., 2023; Alabi, 2024).

### **SOCIOPOLITICAL OBSTACLES TO YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

Political participation is vital for the consolidation of democracy and the overall development of any nation. However, the patriarchal nature of Nigeria's political structure significantly limits youth participation. Political power is often concentrated in the hands of older, predominantly male elites who dominate the political landscape (Makama, 2013; Uwa, et al., 2018; Tama & Maiwuya, 2022). This hierarchical system marginalizes young people, making it difficult for them to penetrate the political arena (Ibezim, 2019; Raphael & Kayode, 2023; Àbàtì, 2024). The marginalization is further compounded by traditional cultural norms that prioritize seniority and view youth as inexperienced and incapable of leadership roles (Birchall, 2019; Suleiman, 2019; Ishola, 2021; Mohammed, 2022).

Conversely, political violence and insecurity are significant deterrents to youth participation in Nigerian politics. The prevalence of electoral violence, including intimidation, harassment, and physical assaults, discourages young people from engaging in political activities (Omotayo, 2022; Pally, 2022; Davis & Turnbull, 2024; Yusuf & Saminu, 2024). The risk of violence is particularly high during elections, where youth are often used as instruments of violence by political elites (Onyenachi, 2018; Ayobolu, 2024; Davis & Turnbull, 2024). This environment of fear and insecurity undermines the willingness of young people to engage in the political process.

Political parties in Nigeria often adopt exclusionary practices that marginalize youth. Internal party dynamics are frequently characterized by godfatherism, nepotism, and patronage, which favor older and established politicians (Adegoke, 2023; Osaghae, 2024). Youths are often relegated to peripheral roles within parties and are seldom given opportunities to contest for significant positions or influence party policies. This exclusion stifles their political aspirations and participation.

Yet the older politicians berate the youth for their nonchalant attitude in politics. They also distrust youth capabilities to participate or be in the vanguard of leading the nation. Hence, the politics of federalism, the socio-economic inequality and issues of ethno-religious fights have continued to divide the country (Hamalai, Egwu & Omotola, 2017; (Idris, 2023; Umeasiegbo, Ogu, & Chukwuemeka, 2023; Okpanachi, 2024).

### **LACK OF POLITICAL EDUCATION AND AWARENESS**

The lack of adequate political education and awareness is another critical obstacle facing the youth. Many Nigerian youths lack the necessary political knowledge and skills to participate effectively in the political process (Okechi, Ngaji, & Timothy, 2018; Ekot & Momoh, 2024). The education system in Nigeria does not sufficiently emphasize civic education, and there are limited platforms for political engagement and discourse for young people (Okunzuwa, 2024). As a result, many youths are disengaged and apathetic towards politics.

The level of youth political awareness is crucial for the engagement of young people in Nigeria's political process. Unfortunately, many young Nigerians appear politically unaware and disengaged, which significantly impacts their participation in the political sphere.

Many Nigerian youth believe that the political system has been hijacked by adults who are unwilling to relinquish power. This perception leads to a lack of interest in acquiring political knowledge, as young people feel their voices do not count (Amzat & Abdullahi, 2016). This disenchantment is attributed to systemic weaknesses within the Nigerian political structure. Amzat and Abdullahi (2016) argue that post-independence, Nigerian youth have faced immense challenges due to these systemic weaknesses, which have stifled their political voices and burdened them with socio-economic problems. They advocate for a socio-political transformation through democratic channels to rekindle youth interest and grow political awareness.

Oladejo & Oni (2017) stress the value of political knowledge, highlighting a significant lack of political education in the country. They attribute this shortfall to inadequate governmental orientation efforts. Furthermore, they note that political information disseminated through newspapers often sets controversial agendas and sometimes provides incorrect information. This results in a disconnection between the government and the masses, making development efforts seem unfeasible.

The reasons for low political awareness and participation among Nigerian youth are multifaceted. As several scholars alleged, youth feel alienated by adults, preventing them from fully participating in decision-making processes (Agbaje & Adejumbi, 2006; Forbrig, 2005b; O'Donoghue et al., 2002). This alienation significantly hinders their political engagement (Harris et al., 2010; Adichie, 2011).

Political awareness is widely recognized as a crucial determinant of participation in electoral activities. For Nigerian youth, this lack of awareness has historically resulted in low levels of political participation. As Galston, (2001); Le & Nguyen, (2021) noted, political knowledge, interest, and engagement are important for young individuals to function as political beings. Without these elements, political engagement is essentially non-existent.

Zaller (1990) emphasizes that political awareness affects virtually every aspect of citizens' political attitudes and voting behavior. Higher political awareness leads to greater attitude stability, ideological consistency, and support for a nation's mainstream values (Eyo, 2024). This underscores the importance of improving political education and awareness among Nigerian youth to enhance their political engagement and participation.

### **CULTURAL FACTORS LIMITING YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

In Nigeria, cultural factors significantly influence political engagement, particularly among the youth. These cultural dynamics, deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and social structures, create barriers that hinder young people from actively participating in politics.

Notably, patriarchal norms and age hierarchies are pervasive in Nigerian society, where elders are traditionally seen as the custodians of wisdom and authority. This cultural deference to age means that young people are often excluded from decision-making processes and political roles (Ibezim, 2019; Abdulyakeen, 2021; Hassan & Umar, 2023). The respect for elders, while a significant cultural value, translates into political marginalization for the youth, who are perceived as lacking the experience and maturity necessary for leadership (Aforka, 2023).

Equally, traditional institutions, such as chieftaincies and monarchies, play a significant role in the Nigerian society (Vaughan, 1991; Adegbulu, 2011; Osinuga, 2020; Nwebo, 2023). These institutions often uphold conservative values that prioritize seniority and established authority over youthful innovation (Afolabi, Olufunmilayo, and Adeola, 2019; Vite, et al., 2020; Chlouba, 2024; Tamba & Kopacheva, 2024). The influence of these institutions can discourage young people from pursuing political ambitions, as traditional leaders frequently endorse older candidates and maintain the status quo.

Gender norms also contribute to the limited political participation of young women in Nigeria. Cultural expectations often confine women to domestic roles, restricting their involvement in public and political life (Nwankwo



& Agu, 2018; Uwa, et al., 2018; Agbalajobi, 2021; Oduwole, Jawondo, & Lawal, 2023). This gender bias is more pronounced in certain regions and ethnic groups, where traditional beliefs strongly dictate women's roles in society (Hassan & Umar, 2023; Omiya & Ojile, 2023; Owoeye, 2023). Young women, therefore, face a dual challenge of overcoming both age-based and gender-based cultural barriers. Even as Nigerian women seek to eliminate some of these hinderances, the patriarchal and cultural norms of the various ethnic groups that make up the system, continues to be a bottleneck.

Likewise, religion plays a key role in shaping cultural attitudes and behaviors in Nigeria (Oseghale, 2024). In many religious communities, there is an emphasis on traditional roles and a resistance to change, which can impede youth participation in politics (Vite, et al., 2020; Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023). Religious leaders often hold significant sway over their congregations, and their endorsement or opposition can influence political engagement (Afolabi, 2015; Eze, 2020; Vite, et al., 2020). Young people may find it difficult to assert their political aspirations in environments where religious doctrines discourage active political involvement or challenge to established authorities. Equally, where politicians utilize the influence of these religious bodies to sway opinions to their interests also makes the youth to jettison political participation.

Basically, the process of socialization in Nigeria typically emphasizes respect for authority and adherence to established norms. From a young age, individuals are taught to conform to societal expectations, which often do not include active political participation (Adekanmbi, Ajibefun, & Ojomo, 2020; Chidi, 2021). The value systems ingrained through family, educational, and community structures can thus discourage political activism and limit the political agency of youth (Agboola & Adaobi, 2022; Eyo, 2024).

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

This study utilized qualitative research approach using case-study method from a critical research perspective. This approach was adopted because the inquiry was focused on an in-depth analysis of the obstacles and pathways to increased youth political participation in Nigeria with the goal of proffering solutions that will assist further policies to engage more youth in governance. The data collection was collected from multiple sources which include interviews, and archived records. The target of this study is the youth who also form the unit of analysis. Face-to-face interview procedures are generally employed in qualitative research to explore participants' personal experiences (Eyo & Hasan, 2021). In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from participants, allowing the researcher to gather subjective information about the constraints to youth political participation in Nigeria. Also, to assess their political awareness in the polity as political knowledge is pertinent to sustain the nation's democracy. According to DeJonckheere & Vaughn (2019), semi-structured interviews enable researchers to explore topics in depth while providing participants with guidance on what to discuss. Although the interview questions were semi-structured, probing questions were used to obtain a more profound understanding of participants' views. The interview protocol was designed to reflect the study's objectives (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed. For the secondary data, archived documents were sourced online from government records, private records, news channels and online publications.

### **Sample/Participants**

Nigerian youth were the main target and participants in the study. The population sample was drawn from young people from the north, south, east, and west of the country residing in Lagos state, Nigeria. Lagos State is a megacity in Nigeria with an estimated population of 21 million (NBS, 2016) and home to all ethnic groups in Nigeria. The targeted population in this regard are Nigerian citizens (male and female) who are youth between the ages 20 and 35 (NYP, 2024). This is in line with the objective of the research which is to explore the constraints to youth political participation in Nigeria as well as an appraisal of the political awareness of Nigerian youth in the country. Through this study, practical solutions to improve youth engagement in the political process will emerge. Participant were purposively selected and rightly identified based on their age, sex, ethnicity, and religious. The study sample were identified and contacted directly. A total of 30 youth, consisting of 18 males and 12 females respectively participated in this intense and in-depth study.

### **Interview Procedures**

The interview guide played a critical role in steering the interview process consistently to ensure the collection of pertinent data. It helped keep informants focused on the subject matter, preventing them from going off-topic (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Naz, Gulab, & Aslam, 2022). To ensure clarity and consistency, the interview questions were pilot tested with five knowledgeable youths, maintaining uniform vocabulary during both the pilot phase and the main study. The interviews were conducted at various locations in Lagos State over a three-month period. The questions evolved from a broad perspective to more specific inquiries about barriers to political participation and the economic, social, cultural, and personal challenges within the country's political process. Each interview lasted between 40 to 50 minutes and was recorded and transcribed verbatim into a Word document. Participants voluntarily consented to the study by completing and signing a consent form before the interviews (Husband, 2020; Xu, et al., 2020). For secondary data, archived documents were sourced online from government records, private records, news channels, and online publications.

This study employed a thematic analysis approach to generate insights into the obstacles and pathways to enhancing youth political participation in Nigeria. The instruments used are validated social science tools for qualitative data collection, aligning with the study's objectives. To ensure data consistency, the collected data underwent reliability testing.

**Table 1** Demography of Participants

Code Of Informants	Age	Gender	Member Of Political Party	Political Experience
RO1	32	M	Yes	9 years
RO2	25	M	Yes	5 years
RO3	29	F	Yes	7 years
RO4	30	M	Yes	8 years
RO5	23	F	Yes	3 years
RO6	31	M	Yes	7 years
RO7	19	F	No	1 year
RO8	28	M	Yes	4 years
RO9	22	M	No	1 year
RO10	35	F	No	10 years
RO11	21	M	No	3 years
RO12	20	F	No	2 years
RO13	28	M	Yes	5 years
RO14	34	M	Yes	8 years
RO15	31	M	No	7 years
RO16	27	M	No	5 years
RO17	30	F	Yes	6 years
RO18	22	M	No	3 years
RO19	20	M	No	2 years
RO20	23	F	Yes	2 years
RO21	20	M	No	3 years
RO22	25	M	No	3 years
RO23	26	F	Yes	3 years
RO24	35	M	Yes	9 years
RO25	27	F	No	2 years
RO26	33	M	No	6 years
RO27	28	F	Yes	3 years
RO28	25	M	No	4 years
RO29	24	F	No	2 years
RO30	27	F	No	1 year

*Onyewuchi (2024). Demography of Participants in the Study*

### Transcription and Coding

The transcribed interviews were meticulously coded, and emerging patterns were used to form themes for data analysis. Verbatim transcription was crucial to capture every detail, including non-verbal aspects of the interaction. Involuntary verbal responses and non-verbal communication provided additional context and clarity, helping to infer the informants' intended statements (Rodham, Fox & Doran, 2015). Expressions such as “ok,” “ah,” “mmh,” “yeah,” “um,” “hmm,” and “uh,” along with hesitations, speech cut-offs, interruptions, giggling, laughter, pauses, and emphases, were included in the transcription process as they added meaning to the respondents' views.

Observations of the informants' demeanor during the interviews were also crucial data sources, recorded as field notes. These observations captured information not evident in the audio recordings, particularly concerning the informants' ethical dispositions. Open coding was implemented through a line-by-line assessment of words, sentences, and paragraphs to identify roles, participation in decision-making and ethical dispositions. Specific words and phrases describing the participants' views were assigned as codes. These codes were descriptive and based on the participants' exact phrases and terms used during the interviews.

The initial step of coding involved a thorough line-by-line reading and assigning of descriptive phrases to the content. Ten codes for research question one, eight codes for research question two, and five codes for research question three were initially created. In the second level of coding, similar codes were identified and grouped into categories to eliminate redundancy. For instance, in response to question one, which focused on the constraints to youth political participation in Nigeria, informants mentioned factors such as money politics, godfatherism (patron-client relationships), socioeconomic status, party politics, among others. These were grouped into one category due to their related meanings. For the second question regarding political awareness, the emerging was political awareness.

Similar and related categories were subsequently merged, while distinct ones were categorized separately to avoid vague and conflicting themes, leading to the emergence of main themes. Themes were analyzed thematically based on subjective interpretation of the data, in line with constructionism/constructivism postulations (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Interpretation of themes into the report was based on data extracts to demonstrate the prevalence of each theme, which constituted the study's findings. Thematic analysis was employed as it allowed for the

identification of patterns and themes within the data set, as well as subjective interpretation of the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This approach provided a detailed depiction of respondents' opinions and experiences, highlighting how their ethical experiences influenced their ability to participate in the country's political process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first research question for this study was: What are the obstacles to youth political participation in Nigeria? Analysis of the data revealed four major themes namely money politics, godfatherism (patron-client relationships), socioeconomic status, age barriers, and cultural influences, which came under the major theme of constraints to youth political participation.

### Money Politics

All the participants were unanimous in their opinion that money a major influencing deterrent to political participation in the polity. Money politics in Nigeria refers to the pervasive use of financial resources to influence political outcomes, often undermining the democratic processes. This includes the use of money for vote-buying, bribing officials, funding expensive campaigns, and maintaining patronage networks. It creates barriers to political entry for ordinary citizens, particularly the youth and marginalized groups, who cannot afford the exorbitant costs associated with political participation. Consequently, money politics perpetuates corruption, reduces political accountability, and entrenches the power of wealthy elites, thereby compromising the quality of governance and democratic integrity in Nigeria.

Particularly, RO4 notes that, money play a big role in Nigeria's politics. Elaborating on this, he explains that,

*The major problem lies in the control of the structures or instruments of the political electioneering process. Unless this issue is addressed, the person who finances the party activities or sponsors candidates will always hold the power.*

The Nigerian political system is driven by money, often turning into a competition of who can distribute the most cash. In this context, intelligence, competence, and good leadership qualities are frequently overlooked in favor of immediate gratification. With rising poverty (WPC, 2018) and a significant portion of the population living on less than two dollars a day (Amaefule, 2018), it becomes easy to entice the impoverished masses with money. Consequently, the youth have little chance of competing in this arena.

Also, another participant, RO15 observed that as a youth,

*You cannot go to primaries and win because it is not free and fair. You also do not have the kind of money these political godfathers' uses to manipulate and get their candidates in... ahhh... A youth that is not economically buoyant or belong to a high-class social status cannot compete favorably in Nigerian politics.*

Overall, informants emphasized the big obstacle that money play in politics. With the youth at a disadvantage, it is obvious that to actually participate in politics as a youth you either must be from a rich background or have a political godfather.

And this is a huge barrier to political participation as the political landscape remains dominated by older, wealthier individuals, further entrenching a system that marginalizes the youth. The lack of transparency and fairness in the electoral process, compounded by money politics, erodes the trust of young people in the political system, leading to political apathy and disengagement (Adetula, 2008; Ogbette, et al., 2019).

### Godfatherism

Majority of the participants also pointed out that another significant barrier to youth political participation in Nigeria is the entrenched system of godfatherism or patron-client relationships. Political godfathers wield substantial influence over the political landscape, often determining who gets nominated for elective positions. This phenomenon is particularly pervasive in Nigerian politics (Onyenachi, 2018; Abechi, Egbuche, & Stephen, 2019; Kura, et al., 2023; Osaghae, 2024). Participants in this study highlighted the critical role of political godfathers. For instance, RO1 (Respondent one) emphasized,

*You have to settle political godfathers for you to get nominations. Those elective posts are not determined by elections really, they are determined by whom you know, who your godfather is.*

This statement underscores the perceived necessity of aligning with influential political figures to gain access to political opportunities, reflecting a broader systemic issue that deters genuine democratic participation by the youth.

Another participant, RO3, highlighted the harmful effect of godfatherism on youth political engagement, noting that this practice stifles the voices of young people even within party structures. According to RO3, political godfathers' control who gets party tickets to contest in elections, making the process neither free nor fair. He pointed out that youths lack the financial resources to compete with these godfathers, who manipulate the system to ensure their preferred candidates win. RO3 stated,

*You cannot go to primaries and win because it is not free and fair. You also do not have the kind of money these political godfathers use to manipulate and get their candidates in. Except you are their ward or they just decide to use you to front for them.*

Additionally, RO25 remarked on the importance of social connections and affiliations within political groups, saying, "If you do not have the social connect belonging to the right association or campaign group...you are not going to win." This

underscores the significant role that networking and aligning with influential groups play in political success, further marginalizing those without such connections.

These insights from the respondents stress the pervasive influence of godfatherism and the systemic challenges it poses to fair and equitable youth participation in Nigerian politics (Ndubuisi, 2018; Nwambuko, Nwobi, & Funmilayo, 2024).

### **Socioeconomic Challenges**

Socio-economic challenges remain one of the major reasons why youth shy away from politics. Many young Nigerians struggle with securing stable employment, making basic survival a higher priority than political engagement. Nigeria faces high youth unemployment rates (Odumade, 2020; Agwatu & Adenekan, 2023; Aruofor & Ogbeide, 2024). According to a report from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), as of Q2, 2020, the youth unemployment rate for ages 15-34 years stood at 34.9%, indicating a persistent challenge for young Nigerians entering the workforce (NBS, 2020). This unemployment rate increased to 7.2% in Q2 2023 for youth aged 15-24 years (NBS, 2023). Additionally, the cost of participating in political activities, such as campaign funding and transportation to polling stations, is unaffordable for many youths.

An informant noted that,

*The problem we have in this country, Nigeria which directly or indirect has affected youth participation is the social status and economic impact of young people in political participation.*

Furthermore, RO5 in his reaction explained,

*The present socio-economic situation in the country is too hard for everyone. At this stage because of the level of poverty when you want to speak no matter how good you are, how attractive you want to say you want to help, I am telling you, people will not even listen to you. You must come with something to offer them." He concludes by saying, "Sincerely speaking there is nothing to expect from the youth when it comes to the impact of the implication of their socioeconomic status when you connect it to, the political outlook of the country.*

The challenging socioeconomic conditions in Nigeria significantly deter youth political participation. Faced with widespread poverty, high unemployment rates, and a general struggle for daily survival, political engagement for young people is an unaffordable luxury. These financial constraints limit their ability to participate actively in the political process.

### **Party Politics Structure**

The participants highlighted party politics and structure as significant barriers to youth engaging actively in politics and seeking political office in the county. Despite political parties establishing youth wings ostensibly to cater to young members, these wings are often led by non-youth leaders. During elections, youth members are predominantly utilized for party rallies and electioneering efforts to support adult politicians. The stringent party regulations and the high costs associated with nomination tickets are prohibitively expensive for the average young person in the community (Ekot & Momoh, 2024).

One youth informant, RO14, recounted his unsuccessful experience running for office, attributing his loss to party politics and financial demands. He expressed frustration with the opaque process of delegate selection during primaries, where influential politicians handpick delegates aligned with their interests, undermining fair competition. He emphasized the need for political party constitutions to be more inclusive and transparent, reflecting broader community interests and simplifying candidacy processes.

In his words, RO14 notes,

*You know the major obstacle is political parties' constitution. It needs to reflect the interest of the people and make things easier for both the candidates and constituents. There must be a clear definition of the process of how candidates emerge. If you like to go by what I experienced, it is sad that at the primary level, from the grassroots, you notice that you have this set of people known as the delegates. But then the question is, what is the make-up of these delegates? I mean, where are these delegates coming from in the first place? Who qualifies these persons to be delegates? You find out that the same politicians that have interest in the same post you are contesting are the same people that will just select some individuals who are their cronies and now come to tell the whole world that these are the delegates. And these are the same people that will come and choose who eventually run for the office. These kinds of laws should not exist within a political party. Who should become a delegate should be left open.*

Despite claims by political parties of waivers and incentives to encourage youth participation, these measures are often not effectively implemented. Participants noted that despite existing policies, decision-making power remains concentrated among established figures, perpetuating barriers to genuine youth involvement in politics.

According to a RO24,

*There are incentives to youth for application to elective posts, the waivers are there it is not a new law. I mean it is there, but I can tell you, it is not working because there are certain people that call the shots." This again exposes the in-house politicking that work against youth political participation."*



Party politics in greatly impacts youth political participation by creating systemic barriers that limit their involvement. Political parties often rely on deep-rooted structures and practices that favor older, more established politicians, thereby sidelining the youth. For instance, party politics in the country is heavily influenced by political godfathers who control party structures and candidate selections. This patron-client relationship marginalizes young aspirants who lack the needed connections and resources to gain favor within the party hierarchy (Okojie & Ebonine, 2024).

The cost of political engagement, driven by the need for large financial resources to secure party nominations and run campaigns, is a key obstacle for young people. Political parties often prioritize candidates who can contribute financially, excluding many youths who cannot afford these expenses (Abdulyakeen, 2021; Sule, Sambo, & Saragih, 2021). There is also the issue of tokenism. When young people are included in party politics, it is often symbolic rather than substantive. They may be given minor roles or positions without real influence or decision-making power, which discourages genuine engagement and restricts their influence in the party (Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2024).

Many Nigerian political parties lack internal democracy, with decisions frequently made by a few influential leaders rather than through a transparent and inclusive process. This reduces opportunities for the youth to participate meaningfully in party activities and rise to leadership positions (Odigwe, 2015; Abdulyakeen, 2021; Akinyetun, 2021).

These issues contribute to a political environment that is unfriendly to young people, continuing their underrepresentation in Nigerian politics and reducing their motivation to participate.

### **Political Awareness**

The result from the appraisal of youth political awareness indicates that there is a lack of adequate political knowledge among the youth. Hence, a majority of the youth have low awareness about politics. RO29 in the interview has this to say, “if I was to appraise the political awareness of the Nigerian youth, in a word I would say poor.”

Equally, RO21 opines,

*I do not think the young ones are politically aware. At least the percentage aware is below 10% considering the teeming population of youth.” On the other hand, participant three stressed that, “little or no youth participation in Nigeria politics as youths are used for political thuggery and mobilization during rallies.”*

In addition, the level of youth political awareness influences their participation in electoral activities. Their level of political awareness here is accounted for by their level of interest in politics, pattern of media use and frequency of political discussion. Thus, the result of this study collaborates prior studies (Dimitrova, et al., 2014; Nche, 2019; Mustapha & Omar, 2020; Arijenwa & Nwaoboli, 2023) that have noted the importance of political knowledge in youth civic engagement.

Youth unemployment keeps increasing daily fueled by government incompetence in the creation of jobs. Many youths can barely take care of themselves on their meagre income. Some are already breadwinners for the families. The daily survival mode leaves no space to engage in politics they do not even have faith in. Hence, though the youth possess a level of political awareness, it is insufficient to generate significant interest in political engagement among them. Especially with their belief that the system has failed them and that their votes do not count.

### **CONCLUSION**

In The study reveals that Nigerian youth face a myriad of obstacles to political participation, ranging from economic challenges and lack of education to cultural norms and institutional barriers. However, practical solutions such as enhancing political education, political awareness, economic empowerment, and leveraging technology offer promising pathways to increased youth engagement in the political process. By addressing these issues and fostering an inclusive political environment, Nigeria can harness the potential of its young population to drive meaningful political change.

The study reveals that Nigerian youth face a myriad of obstacles to political participation, ranging from economic challenges and lack of education to cultural norms and institutional barriers. For example, money politics remain a significant deterrent to youth political participation, as the high cost of political campaigns in Nigeria and the monetization of electoral processes limit the ability of young people to contest and influence political outcomes.

Equally, the entrenched system of godfatherism creates a gatekeeping mechanism where political opportunities are controlled by influential elites, thereby marginalizing the youth who lack such connections to participate politically.

Another pertinent issue is the socioeconomic status of these young people. Youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face additional challenges due to limited access to education, resources, and opportunities, further exacerbating their political disenfranchisement. The rate of poverty currently ravaging the country is another hinderance to their socio-economic status.

Conversely, the dominance of established political parties, which often prioritize loyalty and seniority over innovation and youthful perspectives, restricts the entry of young people into meaningful political roles.

However, despite these challenges, there is a growing sense of political awareness among Nigerian youth. Many are becoming more informed about their rights and the political process, driven by social media and increased access to information.

As such to enhance youth engagement in the Nigerian political process, several pathways can be identified. For instance, implementing policies that reduce the financial burden of running for office and promoting transparency in campaign financing can make political participation more accessible for youth. Also, encouraging internal democracy within

political parties and promoting merit-based leadership can help dismantle the patron-client networks that exclude young people.

The government and all concerned parties need to address the socioeconomic disparities through education and employment opportunities which can empower youth to engage more actively in politics. At the same time, establishing and supporting youth wings within political parties or independent youth-focused political organizations can provide a platform for young voices to be heard. Furthermore, increasing political education and awareness initiatives can equip youth with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the political landscape effectively.

Generally, it is important to note that while significant obstacles remain, there is potential for increased youth political participation in Nigeria if these pathways are pursued and supported by both governmental and non-governmental actors. Additionally, there is need for consolidated action to encourage youth participation in politics. Government, political parties, and society at large must ensure the right political environment in the country that does not make it too difficult for the youth to participate.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research should focus on expanding the understanding of the complex interplay between socioeconomic factors and youth political engagement. Investigating how different socioeconomic barriers, such as poverty and unemployment, specifically deter political participation among different subgroups of youth would provide deeper insights in this field of study. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track changes in political engagement over time, considering shifts in the economic landscape and educational opportunities.

Moreover, exploring the role of digital platforms and social media in shaping political awareness and participation among youth could yield valuable data. Given the increasing reliance on digital communication, it would be beneficial to examine how online political discourse influences offline political actions. By extension, assessing the effectiveness of online political campaigns and mobilization efforts in overcoming traditional barriers to youth participation should be considered. Comparative studies across different regions and countries could also be carried out to highlight best practices and effective strategies to overcome barriers to youth political engagement.

Equally, studies can be conducted around the unique challenges faced by young women in the Nigerian political process and identify strategies to encourage gender equality in political participation. Furthermore, studies can be done to compare the political participation levels and experiences of young men and women to identify any gender-specific barriers and facilitators.

Finally, it is crucial to assess the effectiveness of policy interventions aimed at increasing youth participation in politics. Evaluating programs designed to educate and empower young people politically can inform future policymaking and the development of more targeted initiatives. Engaging with diverse youth populations through participatory research methods will ensure that their voices and perspectives are integral to shaping these future studies.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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