

Beyond Legal Reform: Political Parties and Youth Representation in Nigeria's House of Representatives after the 2018 Age Reduction Law

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Lowering the age requirements for elective positions is often cited as a panacea for addressing young people's underrepresentation in politics, with the belief that such a provision would empower young people and facilitate descriptive representation. 'The Law on Reduction of Age for Elective Offices' was passed in Nigeria on 31st May, 2018, making Nigeria one of the few countries to adopt such a measure. This study investigates how political parties have enabled or constrained the outcomes of the law. Six political parties were chosen for this single case study, accounting for major, medium, and minor party effects. Longitudinal data covering three election cycles from 2015 to 2023 were sourced from the electoral management body database. Empirical evidence shows that while the law has removed a significant age barrier, young aspirants still face challenges at the candidacy and electoral levels. The study found marginal increases in youth representation in the lower house of the Nigerian National Assembly following the 2018 age-reduction law. Although the law reducing the age for elective offices was aimed at opening political space and permitting greater participation by younger people, it does not prescribe any changes to political parties' decision-making in candidate selection. The nature and realities of Nigerian party politics constrain young people and limit their ability to navigate the political system. Regulations are needed to moderate the parties' candidate-selection processes. The absence of intra-party democracy, clientelist partyism, the monetisation of politics, and godfatherism continuously undermine young people.

Keywords: Age reduction law, candidate selection, electoral reform, Nigerian political parties, youth representation

Introduction

Youth involvement in politics has long attracted scholarly attention, often framed within a dual narrative that portrays young people either as catalysts of political instability or as critical agents for democratic growth (Van Gyampo & Anyidoho, 2019; Oinas et al., 2017). When meaningfully integrated into political processes, young people can represent a significant force in democratic decision-making. However, persistent exclusion from governance structures may push them toward alternative forms of political engagement, such as protests and social movements, which can, under certain circumstances, challenge or destabilize existing regimes (Ashmawy, 2018). Despite these implications, scholarly debates on political representation have traditionally focused more on

gender and ethnic inequalities, while comparatively less attention has been paid to age-based exclusion in political institutions (Belschner, 2022). One reason for this limited problematization may be the perception that youth underrepresentation is less consequential than the marginalization of other minority groups. After all, young people inevitably and eventually age and join the older share of the community who primarily wield power (Kurz & Ettensperger, 2023). Nonetheless, this perspective overlooks the structural barriers that systematically delay or restrict young people's access to political office.

However, there has been an increasing interest in young people's political representation in governance in recent years. This includes studies on youth representation on a cross-national level (IPU,

2019; 2021), the European Parliament (Sundström & Stockemer, 2018), the Asian Parliaments (Joshi, 2013), the US House of Representatives (Stockemer et al., 2023) and a country case study (Belschner, 2022). This expanding literature reflects a broader shift in how youth participation is conceptualised: beyond consultation, young people are increasingly expected to participate directly in legislative processes as elected representatives and contributors to policy decisions (IPU, 2019).

Within this broader conversation, Nigeria provides an instructive case. Concerns about the underrepresentation of young people in governance led to the passage of the Age Reduction Law for Elective Offices in 2018. The reform lowered the eligibility age for several political offices with the intention of expanding opportunities for young Nigerians to contest elections and participate more directly in governance. Yet, lowering constitutional eligibility thresholds does not automatically translate into greater youth representation. Political parties remain the primary gatekeepers of candidate selection in democratic systems, playing a decisive role in determining who ultimately gains access to legislative offices as institutions responsible for political recruitment. Therefore, political parties remain central to any discourse on representation and the extent to which policies that foster inclusive representation will achieve their aim. Political parties, for instance, have been implicated in the low political representation of young citizens. Robertson (2009, p. 3) reports that studies on political participation in well-established democratic systems reveal a growing number of young people eschewing conventional means, such as voting and joining a political party. Instead, they resort to other means, such as volunteering and participating in protests. Elsewhere, the Arab Spring and the #ENDSARS protests in Nigeria have shown how youth can resort to alternative means of representation or interest articulation when formal institutional mechanisms fail, even in developing countries. Onwughalu and Obiorah (2018, p. 9) posited that 'for the age (condition) reduction constitution amendment to succeed, the role and organisation of political parties is important. Similarly, Krook and Nugent (2018, p. 60) suggested that reducing the eligibility age for contesting legislatures may have 'permissive' rather than 'prescriptive' implications, depending on the role of political parties. While legislative change

may awaken youth's dormant political aspirations, prompting them to start planning political campaigns earlier than they might before the legislative policy, the new regulations may be permissive rather than prescriptive, permitting young people to declare their interest in running for office and not imposing any obligations on political parties to nominate them in more significant numbers.

Despite the centrality of youth representation in politics, few studies have examined how lowering the age at candidacy translates into actual representation outcomes for young people (Krook & Nugent, 2018; Etim & Duke, 2019; Uzor, 2019; Mohammed, 2022). At the same time, despite the salience of political parties in candidate selection, studies on young people's underrepresentation rarely examine party dynamics. This paper examines the nexus between the age condition amendment, the operations of political parties in candidate selection, and youth legislative representation in Nigeria by investigating how political parties have enabled or constrained the effects of the '*Law on Reduction of Age for Elective Offices*' in Nigeria. The questions it sets out to answer are: Has the law improved the selection of young people as candidates for general elections in the major, medium and minor political parties? Has the '*Law on Reduction of Age for Elective Offices* in Nigeria' improved young people's representation in the House of Representatives (HoR)? The paper contributes to academic discourse on the inclusivity status of Nigerian democracy. By examining how political parties have affected the outcome of the '*Law on Reduction of Age for Elective Offices*', this study has practical implications for policymakers regarding the extent to which the law has achieved its aims and the possible need for modification.

Youth Representation Problem

This paper adopts the African Union's (2006, p. 21) definition of youth as ages 18-35. Youthhood is the period between childhood and adulthood during which individuals must navigate the complex interactions between personal, socioeconomic, and cultural changes. During this period, individuals transit from dependency to autonomy, effectively controlling their lives and taking on social responsibilities (Kenya Youth Development Policy, 2019, p. xi). Despite the centrality of representation in democratic systems, young people remain

significantly underrepresented in governance and decision-making processes (Sundström & Stockemer, 2018). Globally, representative bodies are skewed in favour of middle-aged and old citizens, high-income earners and ethnic majorities (Norris, 1997, p. 1; Sundström & Stockemer, 2018, p. 1), reflecting structural imbalances that systematically exclude young people. As of 2020, 2.6 per cent of world parliamentarians were under 30, 17.5 per cent were under 40, and 30.2 per cent were under 45 (IPU, 2021, p. 7). This situation occurs amid intergenerational challenges, rising protests, and a pro-democracy movement (IPU, 2021, p. 6).

Young people underrepresentation pattern is particularly pronounced in Africa where a predominantly youthful population contrasts sharply with an ageing political leadership (Dews, 2019). This marks a clear departure from the pre-independence era, when young people played central roles in nationalist movements as organisers, intellectuals, and frontline actors (Van Gyampo & Anyidoho, 2019). In Nigeria, figures such as Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Anthony Enahoro exemplified youth leadership during this period (Afolayan, 2018, p. 102). In contrast, contemporary politics reflects gerontocratic politics, illustrated in the 2023 presidential elections, where the two top presidential contenders who were over 70 years old at the day of election. Historical analysis shows that post-independence political trajectories, including authoritarian regimes and prolonged incumbencies, have weakened democratic institutions and constrained youth participation in governance (Van Gyampo & Anyidoho, 2019; Sesay, 2014).

In Nigeria, various civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations have highlighted the underrepresentation of young people, leading to movements and advocacy for policies that enhance youth representation. One of them was the '*Not Too Young to Run Movement*,' which started in 2016 as a move to ease the process of running for office by young people—fronted by over 40 youth-based organisations, the most prominent of which was *Yiaga* (Salaudeen, 2018). The movement initiated and advocated support for 'Legislation on reduction of age for elective positions.' The law was meant to reduce the age requirements for running for office by amending

Sections 65, 106, 131, and 177 of the 1999 constitution (Tukur, 2018). The age condition reduction bill was signed into law by President Muhammadu Buhari on 31st May 2018, reducing the age qualification for the President to 30 from 40, House of Representatives members to 25 from 30 and House of Assembly members to 25 from 30.

While changes in the nature and scope of young people's political engagement and participation have garnered significant scholarly attention in established democracies in recent years, this area of research remains relatively unexplored in emerging African democracies. This gap is significant, as it limits the understanding of how institutional reforms translate into descriptive representation within contexts characterised by strong party control and entrenched elite dominance. Although the law reducing the age for elective offices was aimed at opening political space and permitting greater participation by younger people, it does not prescribe any changes to political parties' decision-making in candidate selection, creating a critical disconnect between formal eligibility and actual access to political office. Accordingly, this paper examines the nexus between the Age Condition Amendment, the operations of political parties in candidate selection, and youth legislative representation by investigating how political parties have enabled or constrained the effects of the '*Law on Reduction of Age for Elective Offices*' in Nigeria.

Methods and Materials

This study adopts a single-case study design with embedded units, focusing on Nigeria as the primary case and political parties as the units of analysis. The design is appropriate given the study's objective of examining how institutional reforms interact with party-level dynamics to shape youth representation outcomes. Nigeria provides a tangible empirical case study for analysing how political parties affect age representation, being one of the few countries to implement legislation reducing the candidate eligibility age to enhance young people's representation. Other countries where such measures have been taken include Turkey in 2006, Jordan in 2022, Lithuania in 2022 and Gabon in 2023 (UNDP, 2013, p. 23; IPU, 2021, p. 46).

In examining representation and the outcomes of the eligible age condition reduction law, the

study focused on the House of Representatives (HoR), the lower chamber of the Nigerian National Assembly. The HoR is a good case for analysis for the following reasons. First, it was the only chamber affected by the national-level age-reduction legislation. While the age qualification for membership in the Senate was left at 35 years, that of the HoR was reduced to 25 years by the 2018 constitutional amendment. Secondly, as a figure of symbolic representation, focusing on the HoR provided context for the nature of descriptive representation at the national level. The most impactful cross-national discussions affecting various demographic groups and identities take place in this arena. Thirdly, the HoR searchlight helped place this study within a global and comparative perspective, as studies on young people's representation tend to draw on information from national assemblies.

The paper utilised election data across multiple cycles and parties (2015-2023). Data were sourced from the electoral management body database, existing studies reports, party documents, statements of leading members of various parties and expert opinions from credible news outlets. Candidate age data were extracted from the INEC database, which contained the ages of candidates participating in the elections. These ages were coded into age ranges to identify youth representation, based on the African Union's 2006 conceptual definition of youth as ages 18-35 (p. 21). Data ranged from the 2015 election (the immediate election before the law on age reduction) and the subsequent 2019 and 2023 elections (after the law on age reduction). The candidate data from 2015 (immediate pre-law period) provides insight into the state of youth representation that fuelled the famous "Not Too Young to Run Movement" and the law on age reduction in Nigeria. Focusing on three election cycles - one before the law and two after - allows for a clear delineation of the study focus, highlighting how specific nuances in party dynamics, especially in the post-law period, affect changes in the number of young candidates and elected representatives. Data sources obtained provides insights into the patterns of young individuals serving as party candidates and elected

representatives in Nigeria, thereby providing answers to research question one (Has the law improved the selection of young people as candidates for general elections in the major, medium and minor political parties) and question two (Has the 'Law on Reduction of Age for Elective Offices in Nigeria' improved young people's representation in the HoR?). Descriptive statistical techniques were employed to analyse patterns in candidate selection and electoral outcomes across parties and election cycles. This approach enables a clear mapping of trends in youth inclusion before and after the reform, while also facilitating cross-party comparisons.

The selection of political parties in the analysis follows a purposive logic anchored on electoral relevance based on legislative seat share across the study period, while accounting for variation in party size. Six parties (All Progressives Congress (APC), People's Democratic Party (PDP), Labour Party (LP), New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), African Democratic Congress (ADC), and African Democratic Party (ADP) were included based on their legislative presence in the House of Representatives (HoR) between 2015 and 2023. This selection captures both dominant and smaller parties, allowing for comparative insights into how party structures and resources may condition youth candidacy and representation.

The parties are classified as follows: major parties (APC and PDP), two medium parties (Labour Party and NNPP), and two minor parties (ADC and ADP).

Table 1: Political Parties Selection Criteria

S/N	Name	Year of est.	Remarks	Classification
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1.	All Progressives Congress (APC) ***	2013	The ruling party has been in power since 2015 and has a strong presence at the subnational levels	Major Party
2.	People's Democratic Party (PDP) ***	1998	The ruling party from 1999 to 2015 had a strong presence at the subnational levels and is currently the largest opposition party.	Major Party
3.	Labour Party (LP) **	2002	Became prominent in the build-up to the 2023 presidential election and came third in the contest	Medium party
4.	New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) **	2001	Came fourth in the 2023 presidential election and won the governorship election in Kano State	Medium Party
5.	African Democratic Congress (ADC) *	2005	Has a low vote share in the 2023 election and has never won a governorship election	Small party
6.	African Democratic Party (ADP) *	2017	Has a low vote share in the 2023 election and has never won a governorship election.	Small party

Source: Author's Compilation, 2026 *** = Major, ** = Medium, * = Minor Party

Data Presentation and Analysis

Presentation of Young People as candidates in the House of Representatives elections from 2015 to 2023

Table 2 presents the age distribution of candidates fielded by the parties between 2015 and 2023. Eight percent (8%) of the candidates presented by the parties for House of Representatives seats during the 2015 election were young individuals aged 30-35. 12.7% were aged between 36 and 40, 43.9% were aged between 41 and 50, 32.5% were between 51 and 60, and 2.7% were between 61 and 70. One candidate (0.1%) was between 71-76. The two major parties (APC and PDP) had the lowest proportion of young candidates. Only 3.1% of APC candidates were aged 35 or below, while 3.7% of PDP candidates were aged 30-35.

Conversely, the medium parties, LP and NNPP, fielded 16.9% and 38.5% young candidates, respectively. Young candidates were prominently featured in the ADC, the sole minor party examined for 2015. Table 2 further shows that individuals aged 30-35 constituted the highest proportion of its candidates. Another important insight from the 2015 data was that individuals aged 41-50 constituted the largest proportion of candidates at the aggregate level. The major interpretation from 2015 is that medium and minor parties provided more opportunities for young candidates, given the total number of candidates they fielded.

In 2019, after the law reducing the age was introduced, the aggregate count of young candidates presented by political parties was 156, representing 12.4% of the total candidates. This signifies a progression from the 2015 election, when young candidates accounted for 8% of the total. The age boundary in 2019 shows that the law on age reduction enabled parties to field candidates as young as 25, in contrast to the 2015 election, when the youngest candidate for the House of Representatives was 30. This implied that some young people utilised the opportunity provided by the law on the age reduction to contest. The party candidate pool shows that young people's candidacy was again lowest among the major parties. 1.7% of PDP candidates were between 25 and 35, while its largest candidate age range was 51 to 60, accounting for 44.2% of its total candidates. Relatedly, the share of candidates within 25 to 35 and 51 to 60 in the APC was 4.1% and 45.6%, respectively.

However, LP performed remarkably well among young people, with individuals aged 25-35 accounting for the highest proportion (29.7%) of its candidate list. The ADC, NNPP and ADP followed this performance. The shift in the highest proportion of candidates was an intriguing observation from the broad demographic data.

Table 2: Presentation of Young People as Candidates in Major, Medium and Minor Parties from 2015 to 2023

2015									
Party	30 – 35	36 - 40	41 - 50	51 - 60	61 - 70	71-76	Median age	Total	Mis.
APC ***	11 (3.1)	41(11.7)	159(45.4)	128(36.6)	10 (2.9)	1 (0.3)	49	350	8
PDP ***	12 (3.7)	35 (10.7)	141 (43)	128(15.2)	12 (3.7)	-	48	328	32
LP **	30 (16.9)	29 (16.4)	81 (45.8)	34 (19.2)	3 (1.7)	-	44	177	10
NNPP **	10 (38.5)	8 (30.8)	7 (26.9)	1 (3.8)	-	-	37	26	-
ADC *	11 (28.2)	4 (10.3)	16 (41)	8 (20.5)	-	-	44	39	1
ADP +	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	74 (8)	117(12.7)	404(43.9)	299(32.5)	25 (2.7)	1 (0.1)	48	920	51
2019									
Party	25 – 35	36 - 40	41 - 50	51 - 60	61 - 70	71- 73	Median age	Total	Mis.
APC ***	14 (4.1)	29 (8.5)	121(35.6)	155(45.6)	20 (5.9)	-	51	339	1
PDP ***	6 (1.7)	31 (8.6)	142(39.4)	159(44.2)	21 (5.9)	-	51	359	1
LP **	41 (29.7)	27 (19.6)	32 (23.2)	22 (15.9)	6 (4.3)	1 (0.7)	40	129	9
NNPP **	5 (21.7)	5 (21.7)	4 (17.4)	7 (30.4)	2 (8.7)	-	44	23	-
ADC *	75 (24)	61 (19.6)	89 (28.5)	70 (22.4)	16 (5.1)	1 (0.3)	43	312	1
ADP *	15 (14.9)	15 (14.9)	31 (30.7)	35 (34.7)	4 (4)	1 (0.9)	48	101	1
Total	156 (12.4)	168(13.3)	419(33.2)	448(35.5)	69 (5.5)	3 (0.2)	49	1263	13
2023									
Party	25 – 35	36 - 40	41 – 50	51 - 60	61 - 70	71- 77	Median age	Total	Mis.
APC ***	11 (3.2)	29 (8.4)	120(34.6)	146(42.1)	41(11.8)	-	52	347	1
PDP ***	19 (5.3)	35 (9.8)	107(30.1)	145(40.7)	50 (15)	-	52	356	3
LP **	43 (19.5)	46 (20.9)	69 (31.4)	47 (21.4)	15 (6.8)	-	43	220	7
NNPP **	54 (15.2)	61 (17.1)	121 (34)	84 (23.6)	36(10.1)	-	45	356	-
ADC *	132 (39.2)	46 (13.6)	101 (30)	46 (13.7)	11 (3.2)	1 (0.3)	40	337	-
ADP *	43 (43)	20 (20)	17 (17)	14 (14)	6 (6)	-	37	100	-
Total	302 (17.6)	237(13.8)	535(31.2)	482(28.1)	159(9.3)	1(0.06)	46	1716	11

Source: Author's Compilation, 2026. *** = Major Party, ** = Medium Party, * = Minor Party, + Data is not available. The party was formed in 2017. Missing values (Mis.) = Candidate age was not given/ was filled as 'unknown' on the INEC document

In 2019, the largest age group shifted from the 41 to 50 age range, as in 2015, to the 51 to 60 age range. This indicates that while the proportion of young candidates increased in the 2019 election, the largest share of candidates also moved towards older age brackets. This can be attributed to major political parties' low commitment to fielding young candidates and regurgitating the incumbents. As Table 2 shows, the proportion of young candidates presented by APC increased by only 1 point, while that of the PDP decreased by 2 points in 2019. However, the proportion of candidates aged 51-60 increased significantly for both parties in the same year. Thus, the increase in young people's candidacy in 2019 mainly reflects the behaviour of the medium and minor political parties, especially the ADC, which alone fielded 75 candidates, 3.5 times as many as the two major parties combined.

Looking at the median age of the parties, the major parties also have the highest median age.

In 2023, the proportion of young candidates aged 25-35 increased from 12.4% to 17.6%. Curiously, while the PDP's share of young candidates increased by 3.6 points, the APC's decreased by 1 point. Similarly, the proportion of young candidates presented by medium parties decreased in 2019. Minor parties were the most favourable for young people during the 2023 House of Representatives election. The ADP was remarkable, breaking its 2019 record by presenting 43% of its candidates as young individuals in 2023. In essence, Table 2 indicates that minor parties are more likely to support young people's political ambitions, followed by medium parties, with major parties exhibiting lower levels of support for young political office seekers.

Young People's Representation in the House of Representatives from 2015 to 2023

This section tracked election winners rather than party candidacies (the outcomes of the HoR elections in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023). It highlighted age representation in the HoR as produced by the six sampled parties, noting the trend before and after the law on reducing the eligibility age. Table 3 indicates that, among the parties examined, only the APC, PDP, and Labour Party (two major parties and one medium party) elected representatives in 2015. Collectively, these three parties accounted for 356 of the 360 members.

As further depicted in Table 3, only the major parties produced young members, though only 5 (representing 1.4% of elected members). 43 (12.1%) of the elected representatives were aged between 36 and 40, 167 representatives (46.9%) were aged between 41 and 50, 123 representatives (34.6%) were aged between 51 and 60, 14 representatives (3.9%) were aged between 61 and 70, and 4 representatives (1.1%) were between the ages of 71 and 75. The 41 to 50 age group had the most legislators, followed by the 51 to 60 age group.

Table 3: Age of Elected House of Representatives Members (2015 – 2023)

2015								
Party	31 - 35	36-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71-75	Median age	Total
APC ***	1 (0.5)	27 (12.5)	104 (47.9)	78 (35.9)	7 (3.2)	-	49	217
PDP ***	4 (2.9)	14 (10.2)	63 (50)	45 (32.9)	7 (5.1)	4(2.9)	49	137
LP **	-	2 (100)	-	-	-	-	40	2
NNPP +	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ADC +	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ADP +	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	5 (1.4)	43 (12.1)	167 (46.9)	123 (34.6)	14 (3.9)	4(1.1)	49	356
2019								
Party	31 - 35	36 - 40	41 - 50	51 - 60	61 - 69	-	Median age	Total
APC ***	9 (4.2)	23 (10.8)	68 (31.8)	100 (46.8)	14 (6.6)	-	51.50	214
PDP ***	2 (1.6)	6 (4.9)	57 (45.6)	55 (44)	5 (4.1)	-	50	125
LP **	-	-	1 (100)	-	-	-	46	1
NNPP +	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ADC *	-	-	2 (50)	2 (50)	-	-	52	4
ADP *	-	-	1 (100)	-	-	-	45	1
Total	11 (3.2)	29 (8.4)	129 (37.4)	157 (45.5)	19 (5.5)	-	51	345
2023								
Party	27 - 35	36 - 40	41 - 50	51 - 60	61 - 68	-	Median Age	Total
APC ***	7 (4)	17 (9.6)	51 (28.9)	81 (45.8)	21(11.9)	-	53	177
PDP ***	5 (4.3)	12 (10.3)	34 (29.1)	50 (42.7)	16(13.7)	-	52	117
LP **	2 (5.6)	7 (19.4)	14 (38.9)	9 (25)	4 (11.1)	-	48	36
NNPP **	-	3 (15.8)	6 (31.6)	6 (31.6)	4 (21.1)	-	52	19
ADC *	-	-	1 (50)	1 (50)	-	-	49	2
ADP +	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	14 (4)	39 (11.1)	106 (30.2)	147 (41.9)	45(12.8)	-	52	351

Source: Author's Calculation, 2026, *** = Major Party, ** = Medium Party, + = No elected representatives

A significant observation from the 2015 election was that only the major parties offered young people a feasible avenue for descriptive representation. The Labour Party (a medium-sized party) appeared to be a promising platform, as evidenced by the two elected representatives aged 36 to 40. The other medium party, NNPP and the

two minor parties, ADC and ADP, did not produce any representatives among the young and elderly cohorts.

Representation was more diverse in the 2019 election, which occurred around a year after the law reducing the age for elective offices was passed. Five of the six political parties under examination

produced HoR members. Additionally, the number of young representatives produced across the board increased to 11, constituting 3.2% of elected HoR members. Just as in 2015, all the young representatives elected in 2019 were produced by the major parties, namely the APC and PDP. Once again, Table 3 illustrates that although the majority of candidates presented by major parties fell within an older age range, they were still the only feasible supply route for young aspirants seeking office in the lower chamber of the National Assembly.

In 2023, the number of young HoR members elected increased by 3 (from the 2019 figure), bringing the total to 14 (4% of the total elected representatives). The young representatives were primarily supplied by APC, followed by PDP and then a medium party – the Labour Party. However, when considered in context, young people still constituted just a tiny fraction of elected representatives. As depicted in Table 3, 39

representatives (11.1%) were between 36 and 40 years old, 106 representatives (30.2%) were between 41 and 50 years old, 147 representatives (42%) were between 51 and 60 years old, and 45 representatives (12.8%) were between 61 and 68 years old. This distribution highlights a concentration of elected representatives in the middle to older age ranges. The figures also reiterated findings from previous years: major parties and, to an extent, medium parties provided the most feasible route for young people's representation. This was the case despite the median age being the highest among the major political parties.

Table 4 aggregates data on the percentages of young candidates and elected young candidates across the selected parties from 2015 to 2023. The percentage of young people elected was significantly lower than the candidature rate.

Table 4: Comparing Age Composition at 'Candidate' and 'Representative' Levels 2015 to 2023

Year	Share of Young Candidates aged 25 - 35	Share of Elected Young Candidates aged 25 – 35
2023	17.6%	4%
2019	12.4%	3.2%
2015	8%	1.4%

Source: Author's computation, 2026

An observation from Table 4 is that older candidates, particularly those backed by major parties, enjoyed more electoral success than younger contenders. However, a favourable aspect highlighted is that the number of HoR members elected has increased at each electoral cycle. Before the law on age reduction, the percentage of HoR members aged 35 and below among the examined parties was 5, representing 1.4% of the total HoR members. This figure rose to 11 (3.2%) in 2019 and 14 (4%) in 2023. Conversely, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, the share of representatives aged 36-40 fluctuated, with 43 in 2015, 29 in 2019, and 39 in 2023. The proportion of representatives aged 41-50 consistently declined from 2015 to 2023, while those aged 51-60 rose in 2019 but decreased in 2023.

When analysed within the context of the preceding tables, two other intriguing findings can be derived from Table 4. First, while the eligibility age law removed the age barrier and enabled more

younger HoR members to be elected, the composition of the House remained older, with members aged 51 to 60. Second, the percentage of young representatives increased by 1.8% in 2019, even though the law reducing the age limit was enacted only about a year before the election. Yet, the percentage saw a modest 0.8% increase in 2023, which was lower than expected. Expectations were that since the law had been in place for an extended period, allowing parties (since 2019) to work towards getting an intergenerational mix of candidates in 2023, young people's representation ought to have been remarkably higher in 2023. This raises questions about the law's effectiveness in the Nigerian landscape.

Findings Compared to Extant Literature and Theoretical Pathways to Youth Representation

Major/minor party behaviour towards outgroups

Findings from the study show a dissimilar trends in major/minor party behaviour towards outgroups,

including gender, minorities, ethnicity, age and religion. Medium and minor parties are warmer towards young people, with young candidates constituting a significant proportion of their total candidates. The finding aligns with Nwankwor and Nkereuwem's (2019, p. 11) submission on minor parties' sympathy for women and other outgroups. Herzog (1987, p. 321) argues that minor political parties frequently advocate for specific and limited interests, including those of young people. The limited political space within major parties pushes many young people into smaller parties. The problem with young people shifting to more enabling, smaller parties is that they face challenges measuring up to candidates sponsored by major parties and are less likely to win elections. According to Sirajudeen Adebakin, a House of Representatives aspirant who moved from the APC (major party) to the KOWA (minor party), 'You cannot perform optimally if you belong to any of those parties (minor parties)' due to the dearth of sponsorship' (Kazeem, 2019).

However, our analysis found that young people from political families/backgrounds may be better able to navigate contracting practices within major political parties through their familiar connections. Reports in dailies and research articles document family dynasties in Nigeria, where experienced politicians pave the way for their children's entrance into politics through the major political parties, especially in the National Assembly (Ijediogor, 2023; Seye, 2023; Idris et al., 2018; Dada, 2022; Punch, 2022). Young people with political backgrounds are more likely to have the financial or political resources to deploy strategies that might not be available to neutral or low-resourced candidates.

The nature and realities of Nigerian party politics constrain young people and limit their ability to navigate the political system. According to institutional theory, all political and non-political systems are governed by rules that dictate the behaviour of the members. Still, in some circumstances, rules are formal (set in law and constitution) and informal (realities and how a system functions in practice). This study on the effectiveness of the rules on age reduction examined both formal laws and the realities, with each regulating the other. Regarding the discourse on party size/strength, the study confirmed previous

results that candidates from minor parties are less able to contest against major parties. Candidates who receive backing from political parties and their associated resources have a high advantage in electoral contests (Guaja & Cross, 2015, p. 2). Major parties are more empowered to provide such support than minor parties. Party backing grants candidates access to professional, seasoned campaign staff and the financial resources needed for a successful campaign (Hassell, 2015, p. 77), and elections are likely to favour candidates sponsored by major parties with significant financial strength. Small parties fail to secure seats in parliament due to the substantial costs they incur to survive and their restricted access to the media (Dinas et al., 2015). Candidates from major parties are more able to mobilise extra-judicial means to propel their candidates into power. This finding is consistent with Rabi'u's (2024) analysis of small parties' struggle in Nigeria's challenging political landscape, characterised by electoral malpractice, violence, and high costs of election litigation. Smaller parties lack sufficient financial and resource support, have insufficient public backing, recognition, and internal coherence, and face impartiality in the electoral process. The finding also fits into wider studies in hybrid democracies. Ali (2023) examined how small parties and less wealthy candidates do not benefit from electoral legislation and reforms to foster representation.

Preference for Older Candidates

Overall, the study shows that the representation of young people has progressed incrementally across political parties. Young people's descriptive representation in the lower house of the National Assembly in Nigeria increased marginally following the adoption of the age-reduction law, rising from 8% in 2015 to 12.4% in 2019 and 17.6% in 2023. This finding aligns with Krook and Nugent's (2022) analysis of the effect of the age-reduction law on young people's representation. Similar to their result, this study also shows that citizens aged 41-60 are usually much more represented in parliaments. The major Nigerian political parties struggle to manage incumbents (usually older citizens) who may defect to strengthen opposition parties if they do not secure the party's flag during the nomination process. 'Top legislators from the APC and PDP defected to other

parties due to their failure to secure party nominations before the 2023 elections' (Baiyewu et al., 2022). Beyond appeasements, however, parties' preference for older candidates may also flow from a strategic calculation to field experienced politicians, who are perceived to have higher election chances. In line with the present results, Stockemer and Sundström's (2022, p. 110) and Curry and Haydon's (2018, p. 587) studies found that young people have more difficulty winning elections than older age groups. While their studies are Eurocentric, this study fills the research gap in Africa's largest democracy.

While this study does not investigate which political category the average Nigerian voter prefers (by age or experience), we found that parties (especially major parties) prefer older candidates. This aligns with Belschner's (2022, p. 91) outcomes in Ireland. Grahn (2023, p. 1) stated that politicians just starting can face disadvantages due to prevailing standards within political parties regarding the attributes considered necessary for success. These norms frequently prioritise characteristics, assets, and skills that young individuals have not yet obtained. 'Political parties in Nigeria have discouraged and discriminated against young candidates during the nomination process' (Kazeem, 2019; Olatunji, 2023). Young Nigerians face a series of challenges at the nomination stage. Political parties practice centred party decision-making, exhibiting institutional and psycho-cultural deficiencies and distortions in party politics and competition. Financial influence, vote-buying among delegates, bribery involving party officials, express candidate imposition, violence, violation of due process and high financial cost of access are common (Innocent & Eikojonwa, 2019; Egwim, 2020, p. 96; Adekeye & Ambali, 2017, p. 4-5; Abba & Babalola, 2017)—the overbearing influence of the elite results in a candidate selection procedure where the results are already predetermined. The consequences are usually vexing, leading to parallel primaries and crises within political parties (Ikechuckwu, 2015, p. 116). Thus, young people are often asked to wait their turn (Amaza, 2022).

The Role of Ideological Parties

The major parties' lower likelihood of supporting young people in Nigeria can be explained, in part, by the nature of/lack of ideological or normative

aspirations. Celis and Erzeel (2015, p. 3) noted that the desirability of improving inclusivity in the candidate pool may be influenced by variables such as ideology and the conscious effort to get an intersectional mix. This affects the party's willingness to recruit candidates from underrepresented demographic groups. Given that political parties in Nigeria enlist ideological leanings merely rhetorically rather than in practice (Egwim, 2022; Egwim, 2018), they may be less concerned about the normative ideal of an intersectional mix of age distributions among candidates presented for political office. Onwughalu and Obiorah (2018, p. 9) posited that political parties must be reformed across ideological lines for the age (condition) reduction constitution amendment to succeed in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Lowering the age requirements for elective positions was intended to address young people's underrepresentation in politics. The study found marginal increases in the representation of young people in the lower house of the Nigerian National Assembly following the 2018 age-reduction law, contrary to expectations that the law would have a significant effect. These marginal results in young people's representation reflect major parties' failure to nominate them in large numbers and minor parties' (who tend to nominate more youths) low electoral performance. Data show that younger '*candidates*' are, on average, more than the actual '*elected representatives*' relating to the supply-side issue of a shortage of young candidates in the major parties.

Although the law reducing the age for elective offices aimed at opening up political space, permitting greater participation by younger people, it does not prescribe any changes to political parties' decision-making in candidate selection. The nature and realities of party operation constrain young people and limit their navigation in the political system. It is safe to conclude that the law reducing the age for elective offices is insufficient to address young people's political representation, mainly because it does not mandate or enhance favourable changes within parties and system-level political processes. Isolated legal changes may not effectively enhance young people's political representation. The problem of underrepresentation must be addressed through a holistic approach that

involves comprehensive party-level, electoral, institutional, and cultural reforms.

The absence of intra-party democracy, existence of clientelist partyism, monetisation of politics, and godfatherism continuously undermine young people. Young people navigate a murky political atmosphere, contesting against more well-resourced and well-connected political adversaries who are backed by party elites who encourage 'turn by turn' politics. In addition, party leaders often seek to appease well-resourced candidates and incumbents by handing over the party flag to them at the expense of young aspirants. These challenges also extend to the electoral level. The monetisation of politics fuels clientelism and vote-buying. Electoral violence, social and cultural norms, agenda-setting gap, poor engagement of young people and possible sympathy of young people for older candidates also affect young aspirants when trying to get elected.

By analysing how the political system remains closed despite the introduction of legal/policy reforms, the study draws out the salience of party elites who determine who gets what within political parties. Findings from the study highlight the need for further reforms across the electoral, institutional and cultural dimensions to open up the political system and enhance broad representation in governance. Such measures will resolve or mitigate the challenges young aspirants face at the nomination and election levels. Existing regulations on political parties' internal democracy in Nigeria are embedded in the Constitution and the INEC Code of Conduct for Political Parties; such laws should be implemented. While these regulations might be open-ended and not targeted at specific age groups, implementing them will break the influence of political godfathers. Regulations are particularly needed in moderating the party's candidate selection process. Various aspects of political financing affect young people (the cost of nomination forms, campaign finance constraints); electoral expenses should be affordable. Adopting electoral quotas to improve the political representation of various identity groups is now an appreciated strategy. Political parties should be legally obligated to include a minimum number of young individuals on their candidate lists or, voluntarily, establish quotas for youth representation within their party regulations.

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