

**Full Length Research**

# **Exploring Youth Political Space and Political Participation in Nigeria: An Assessment of the “Not Too Young To Run” Policy**

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This paper examines the implementation of the Not Too Young To Run (NTYTR) Policy in Nigeria. The NTYTR Bill was sponsored in July 2017 by Honorable Tony Nwolu in the House of Representatives and Senator Abdulazeez Nyako in the Senate at the National Assembly, the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Bill's main provision calls for the reduction in age qualification for those seeking elective offices for the post of the President to be reviewed from 40 to 30, Governor 35 to 30 years, Senator 35 to 30 years, House of Representatives 30 to 25 years, and House of Assembly 30 to 25 years respectively. The sections amended in the 1999 Constitution that contains age restrictions were; 65, 106, 131 and 177 in order to expand youth political space in the Nigerian political process. The Bill was signed into law by President Muhammadu Buhari on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2018. This study is anchored on political culture as its theoretical framework. The methodology used is content analysis and data was collected from secondary sources and analyzed by qualitative descriptive method. The finding of the study reveals that the passage of the NTYTR Policy has promoted youth inclusion and political participation in politics in Nigeria. However, other problems that remain are the monetization of politics in the prices of intention and nomination forms by major political parties.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Youth Space, Political Participation, Not Too Young To Run, Nigeria

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Democracy as an ideology and system of government guarantees freedom of participation in the political process by all citizens. This freedom is not given without restrictions that hinder, control or guide political participation. Over the years in Nigeria issues bordering on youth exclusion in politics, decision making and governance remains problematic.

According to the National Democratic Institute (2016) all around the world, contracting political space is a growing concern not just in countries that have struggled under repressive or autocratic governments, but also in countries with a tradition of democratic practices and norms. Nigeria has a long history of colonial and military rule which has negatively affected her political culture and political development especially the aspect of youth participation in politics through constitutional and institutional mechanisms.

Restrictions on political space frequently occur in the form of legal and institutional barriers that hamper citizens' ability to actively participate in the political process (Nwolu, 2018). Though the hurdles of limited suffrage posed by ownership of properties, race, religion, sex and income have been conquered, legal and constitutional barriers on age limits to elective political offices continue to pose challenges to inclusive youth political participation in Nigeria's contemporary political space especially since the return to civil rule in 1999.

Historically speaking, the young people in Nigeria are manipulated by the political elites to engage in illegal political participation through the assassination of political opponents, snatching of ballot boxes and political thuggery. Unfortunately, after acquiring political power the youth are relegated to the background in governance and decision making. According to Mohammed (2018), this is conceived as the criminalization of politics in Nigeria when the youth are used, abused, and become bemused in the political process.

It is the need for an inclusive political space for young people to participate actively in formal political institutions and processes, particularly vying for elective offices at all the levels of government in Nigeria that motivated this study. The NTYTR Bill was passed by the National Assembly in 2018 to alter Sections; 65, 106, 131, 177 of the 1999 Constitution as (amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

It is in against this backdrop that this study will examine the provisions, dynamics, contributions, challenges and prospects of the *Not Too Young To Run Policy* (NTYTR) as it promotes youth political participation in Nigeria.

The article is divided into six sections. Section one covers the historical background of the *Not Too Young To Run* Movement in Nigeria. Section two looks at the setting and the context of political space in Nigerian politics for the youth. Section three delves into the youth political space and political participation, while section four handles the types of spaces in democratic society and section five presents the theoretical framework. Finally, section six deals with the challenges and prospects of the policy.

## 1. Historical Background of the *Not Too Young To Run* Movement in Nigeria

The campaign for the expansion of youth political space and participation in Nigeria was championed by the Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth, and Advancement (YIAGA Africa). Its motto is; Democracy, Governance and Development. YIAGA is a non-profit youth organization that promotes good governance, democracy, human rights and development. YIAGA was founded by Samson Itodo and Cynthia Mbamalu in 2007 as a students' group in University of Jos-Nigeria. YIAGA has offices in Nigeria, Gambia, Liberia, Ghana and Sierra Leon. The headquarters of the organization is Abuja and it has leadership structures in the 36 states of the federation and the 774 Local Government Areas. In 2014, YIAGA launched the *ThumpitRight* campaign with the support of the MacArthur Foundation which was focused on mobilizing young people to participate in the electoral process. The Not Too Young To Run campaign movement was formed in May 2016 with the sole aim of seeking the reduction in age limit for those vying for political offices in Nigeria. The campaign slogan is "If you're old enough to vote, you're old enough to run!" The hashtag *#Not Too Young To Run* was adopted in order to raise awareness for the campaign on social media.

According to the Executive Director YIAGA Africa Samson Itodo, "young people can no longer be spectators, cheerleaders, and campaign merchants in the democratic process". The main challenge of the campaign was convincing legislators to vote in support of the amendment. Dislodging political inequality is an uphill task in a country like Nigeria.

In November 2016 a global campaign was launched at the United Nations Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law in Geneva. The official launching of the campaign had in attendance major agencies such as; the Office of UN Secretary Generals Envoy on Youth, the UN Development Programme, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the European Youth Forum, and YIAGA (YIAGA Africa, 2019).

According to the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on youth "Young people have every right to be active participants in civic and public life. It is time to ensure they no longer face arbitrary barriers to run for public office" (Alhendawi cited in Usigbe, 2018).

In a similar development, the African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) endorsed the *Not Too Young To Run* campaign in 2017 after a three-day consultative forum on youth in Abuja, Nigeria. The meeting resolved that the creative energies of the youth will increase productivity and turn the vibrant human resource into African development.

The campaign was supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, National Democratic Institute, UN Development Programme, the United Kingdom Agency for International Development and the Open Society for West Africa: among others. There were over one hundred different groups that supported the movement in Nigeria and globally (YIAGA Africa, 2018; 2019).

## 2. Setting the Context: Youth Political Space and Politics in Nigeria

Before the *Not Too Young To Run* Act was passed, Nigeria was among the countries operating a constitution with provisions that restrict the right of young persons to seek elective positions on account of age restrictions. This is what prompted the campaign for the reduction of age limit by the various youth group and civil society organizations in Nigeria.

A youth is defined as any person between the ages of 18-35 years in Nigeria. However, with the recent amendment as a result of the passage of the *Not Too Young To Run Policy* in 2018, it includes anybody within the ages of 15-29 years (National Youth Policy, 2009; 2019). For instance, the various conceptions of youth globally based on formal definitions by age include the following; World Health Organization (WHO) 10-29 years, United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 15-24 years, European Commission (EC) 15-29 years, World Bank 16-30 years, Common Wealth 15-29 years, African Charter 15-35 years, and Nigeria 18-35 years, respectively.

**Table 1.** Constitutional Age Provisions for Elective Office(s) in Nigeria

S/N	Position	Previous Age(s)	Present Age(s)	Amended Sections in 1999 Constitution
1	President	40 years	30 years	Sections 131 (a)
2	Senate	35 years	30 years	Sections 65 (1) (a) and (b)
3	House of Representatives	30 years	25 years	Sections 65 (2) (b)
4	Governor	35 years	30 years	Sections 177 (b)
5	State House of Assembly	30 years	25 years	Section 106 (b) and (d)

**Source:** Author's Compilation, 2020 with data from 1999 Constitution as amended

The aim of the bill is to ensure a more inclusive political system and the political process in Nigeria. There were series of civic engagements by the NTYTR movement embarked upon to press for the speedy amendment of the 1999 Constitution by the National Assembly and State Assemblies. At last, it was a huge success that 35/36 State Assemblies have endorsed the amendment (Mbamalu, 2018).

## 3. Political Space and Youth Political Participation in Nigeria

Since the return to civil rule in 1999, none of the four presidents that ruled Nigeria was below 50. For the records, only two governors were elected at the age of 40 since 1999. Barr. Gabriel Suswam was elected governor of Benue State in 2007 at the age of 40 and Alhaji Yahaya Bello too was elected governor of Kogi State at the age of 40 in 2015. This same story is applicable to the House of Representatives and Senate in this fourth republic. It, therefore, implies that one of the major reasons for this exclusion and marginalization of youth was the age restrictions in the constitution for those vying for political offices.

Political space refers to the avenues, opportunities and entry points available for citizens to express their voice and influence in political process and outcomes. The relative degree of political space may be placed on a continuum from open and inclusive to closed and exclusive. Political space is considered open if citizens are able to communicate their preferences, organize, act and engage government both individually and collectively without restrictions or harassment. The principle that space must be actively demanded, occupied and defended by citizens applies everywhere (NDI, 2016). Even where space for civil society is fairly open and accessible, it will inevitably shrink and disappear in the absence of citizen participation.

Political space in a democracy may have different connotations from; institutional channels, political discourses, social and political practices which the poor and those working with them can pursue poverty reduction initiatives. However, there are policy spaces which bring together policymakers and citizens together for interactions and transformative potential.

It is important to note that power relations help to shape the boundaries of spaces, what is possible within them, and who may enter them, with which identities, discourses and interests. Political space is a space of interest and power which must be contested by different groups in the political system (Cornwall & Coehlo, 2006).

Political participation is where freedom is not only a right to participate effectively in a given space but the right to define and to shape that space. This is entirely about power and influencing social and political change. Therefore, formal and traditional political participation should be measured through political party and trade union membership, voting, registering to vote and attending political meetings regularly. Hence, participation, contestation and representation are fundamental elements of democracy (Jega, 2007).

According to Milbrath (1965), political participation can be classified into three major types which include; gladiatorial, transitional and spectator type respectively. The gladiatorial activities are when citizens hold public or party offices, standing as a candidate in elections, soliciting for funds for the party during campaigns. The transitional activities level of involvement includes making a monetary contribution, contacting a political leader and attending a political rally or meeting. Finally, the spectator activities are exposing one's self to political stimuli, influencing another person to vote in a certain way, voting and initiating a political discussion. Therefore, the youth must choose to be part of the political process as gladiators, not spectators to be able to influence decisions and power dynamics in the political system.

President Muhammadu Buhari while receiving the All Progressives Congress (APC) national youth leaders who came to congratulate him on his successful re-election in 2019 was reported to have said "Whether we like it or not, we will someday handover to Nigerian youths. And you have to brace up for leadership. Some interest groups will come up with ethnic, religious issues, but you have to look at the broader picture" (Buhari, 2020).

According to Robertson (2009) his interpretation of exit, voice and loyalty and how these are applied to the question of youth political involvement is as follows;

- i. **Exit** refers to the choice made by a young person not only to abstain from involvement in the traditional forms of political participation, voting and party membership but to also opt-out of informal forms such as volunteering and contentious politics
- ii. **Voice** refers to the choice made by a young person, to become involved in political actions which have as their aim changing current policy or public opinion, this is most likely to take the form of involvement in informal modes of participation and in particular in protest activities, but could also be evident in the choice to participate in elections;
- iii. **Loyalty** refers to the choice made by a young person to engage in traditional forms of political participation, particularly by becoming a member of a political party (Robertson, 2009).

#### 4. Types of Spaces in a Democratic Society

In a democracy, spaces are avenues for citizens' engagement with the state or government. These spaces can expand or shrink based on the pre-existing political dynamics and regime type. It is expected that under military rule political spaces are close/shrink while in the civilian rule the political spaces are open/expand. Globalization has altered or brought new changes and frontiers for digital democracy where governance, political participation, commerce and policies are arrived at using technology as a medium of decision making. In the 21st-century democracy, political spaces are too numerous and difficult to control or sanction courtesy of globalization in the context of e-governance. The NDI (2016) has identified the following as common political spaces in a democratic society:

1. **Created Space:** When citizens introduce new ways to engage with a government that did not previously exist. Advocacy campaigns and political process monitoring initiatives are examples of created space.
2. **Accessible Space:** Political space is considered accessible if citizens are able to express political preferences without interference or harassment by the government.
3. **Occupied Space:** Space that is meaningfully filled by citizens with tangible political concerns requiring government responsiveness.
4. **Claimed Space:** Space in which participation is based on citizen terms and objectives.
5. **Invited Space:** Space in which citizens are invited to participate by authorities. By occupying invited space, citizens and CSOs may become a part of the political process, but only at the discretion of the ruling power and not on their own terms. Examples include most elections and government-initiated constituency dialogue.
6. **Online Space:** Virtual space for political engagement. Particularly in places where government restrictions make it difficult for citizens to assemble or organize in person, online space offers an alternative means for citizens to express their voice. However, activists may still face government surveillance and harassment, and opportunities may be limited where there is low internet penetration.

#### 5. Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted as a framework for analysis in this paper is political culture. The term "political culture" first appeared in modern empirical Political Science in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is chiefly associated with the American political scientist Gabriel Almond. In a 1956 essay, Almond states that "every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientation to political actions." In their work, *The Civic Culture* Almond and Verba (1963) this

claim is formalized under the heading of political culture, which is defined as “the specific political orientations, attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system,” and the political culture of a nation as “the particular distribution of patterns of orientation toward political objects among the members of the nation”.

Although the Civic Culture framework is well known, it is worthwhile to explore the key elements on which we build it. Almond and Verba (1963, 15–17) characterized a nation’s political culture in terms of two dimensions. First, they used a Parsonian approach to distinguish between different types of attitudes:

1. Cognitive orientations involve knowledge and beliefs about politics.
2. Affective orientations are positive or negative feelings toward political objects.
3. Evaluative orientations involve judgments about political options and processes.

Second, they identified four different classes of political objects toward which citizen attitudes are directed:

1. The political system in general.
2. Input objects, such as political parties, interest groups, or political actors engaged in conveying demands from the citizenry to institutions.
3. Output objects, such as government bureaucracies or agents of state authority that implement public policies.
4. Orientations toward self and others in terms of role models of what the ideal citizen should do.

Combining these two dimensions, Almond and Verba (1963) have identified three ideal types of political culture.

- i. The Parochial culture: Citizens are mostly unaware of their government and have little interest in politics. This type of political culture is mostly found in third world countries.
- ii. The Subject Culture: Citizens somewhat informed and aware of their government and occasionally participate in the political process. This type of political culture is mostly found in Communist countries.
- iii. The Participant Culture: Citizens are informed and actively participate in the political process. This type of political culture is mostly found in the West or developed Capitalist countries.

The reason why the political culture is used here is that African culture and politics places much emphasis on three things; status, age and experience. Hence, the youth by definition of power dynamics in African societies have to be guided or undergo tutelage of the elders. The political culture gives much preference to “age”; the community leaders who transformed into political elites in modern Nigeria were usually elders. Therefore, military rule coupled with manipulations and discriminations through some certain constitutional instruments where legal barriers were created to use, maintain and protect the power cycle in a given class or group. Part of the reasons why Nigerian youth cannot be united and fight a common cause are; tribal and regional politics, godfatherism, political violence and money politics among others.

FEATURES	COLONIAL PERIOD	1 <sup>ST</sup> REPUBLIC	VARIOUS MILITARY ERAS	2ND REPUBLIC	3RD REPUBLIC	1999 TO DATE
Ethnic politics	Slightly Prevalent	Very prevalent	Not prevalent	Prevalent	Not prevalent	Prevalent
Election rigging	Prevalent	Very prevalent	Not prevalent	Prevalent	Not prevalent	Very prevalent
Political violence	Slightly Prevalent	Very prevalent	Not prevalent	Very prevalent	Very prevalent	Very prevalent
Monetization politics	Not prevalent	Slightly Prevalent	Slightly Prevalent	Very prevalent	Very prevalent	Very prevalent
Weak ideological frame	Not prevalent	Slightly Prevalent	Not prevalent	Slightly Prevalent	Very prevalent	Very prevalent
Godfatherism	Not prevalent	Slightly Prevalent	Not prevalent	Slightly Prevalent	Not prevalent	Very prevalent

**Figure 1.** Features of Nigeria’s Political Culture in Historical Perspective

**Source:** Uwais Electoral Reform Committee Report (2008)

The Nigeria Youth Policy on agenda for political participation has identified the following five pillars as a framework to build youth on political participation.

- i. Youth Legal framework
- ii. Youth Affirmative Action
- iii. Financing youth participation in politics
- iv. Political Party Structure and Administrative Processes
- v. Democratic standards for election management

## 6. Challenges and Prospects

The most common statement in the Nigerian social and political milieu is that youth are the leaders of tomorrow. This statement is outdated considering the way the youth are treated in the political process by the powerful elites and the political class or ruling class who manipulate the political system for their selfish gains. It is a struggle between organized minorities with the unorganized majority (Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1935).

Even though age is not the only determinant of leadership qualities but classifications of generations were done based on age-grade despite other critical factors like psychological, biological and cultural variables (Furlon, 2013; Bello-Kano, 2009).

The Governor of Kaduna State Mal. Nasir El-Rufa'i has blamed the problem and challenges of youth inclusion and participation in politics to the youth themselves when he said:

“We try to get the youths to engage but what we find is that youths come into the political process with the sense of entitlement. Nobody gives you power; you have to get involve and fight and negotiate for it. If youths think that the old guys will just handover to them because they are younger. It has never happened anywhere in the world...” (El-Rufa'i, 2017).

The struggle for youth political participation is not over but another level has just started. There are many challenges the youth would surely face in the process of benefiting from the passage of the NTYTR policy in Nigeria. Experts in the study of political participation identify three major factors that affect youth involvement in politics which are; political apathy, psychological reason and economic factors. Other challenges may include; divide and rule tactics of politicians, institutional/structural barriers, and lack of organizational strategy, threats, violence and general lack of awareness at the grassroots among the youths.

**Table 2:** The Prices of Expression of Interest and Nomination Form(s) into Various Elective Offices in APC & PDP during the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria

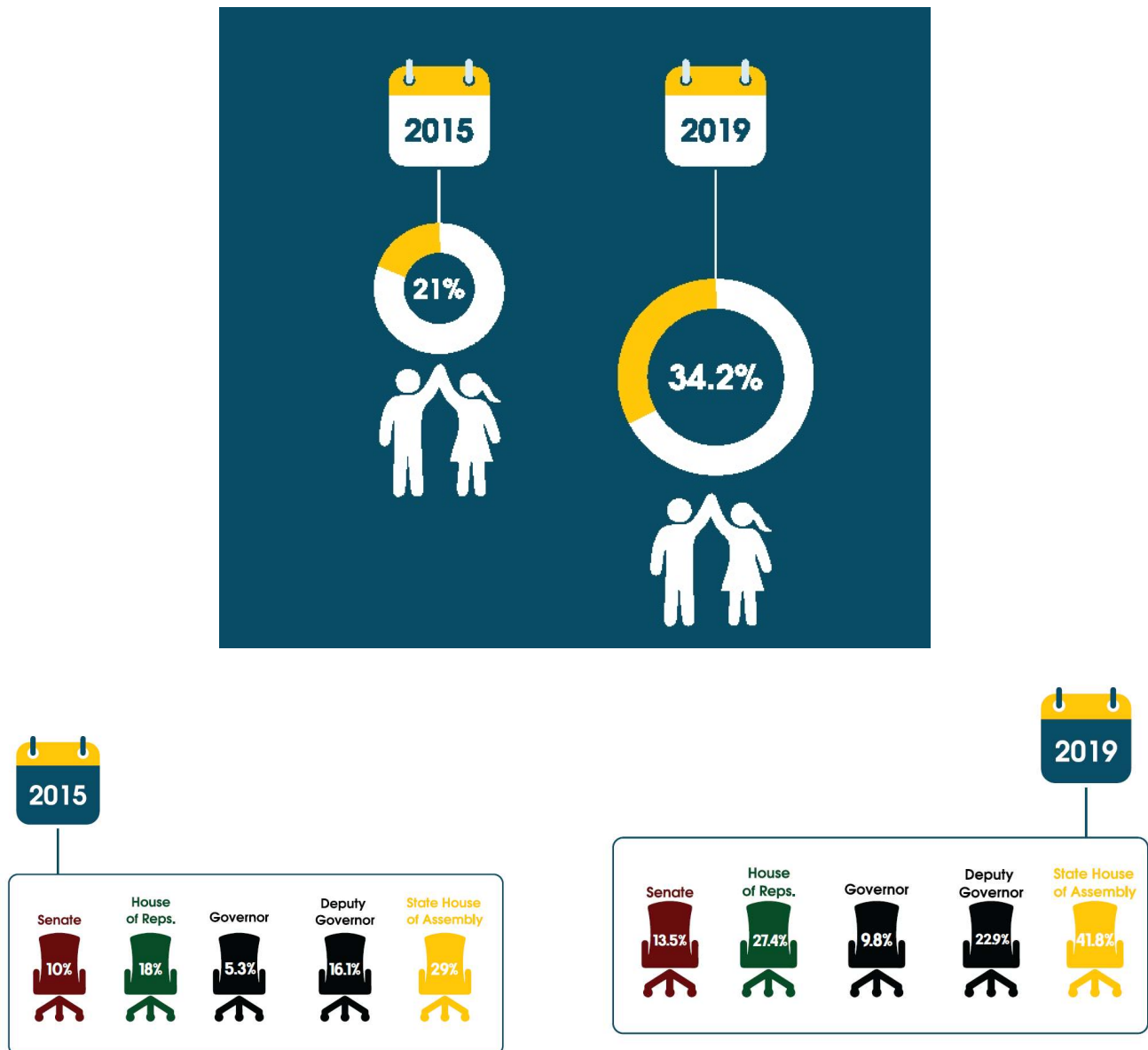
Party	Elective Office (s)	Prices for Expression of Interest Form (s)	Prices for Nomination Form (s)	Total in Millions of Naira
APC	President	₦5,000,000	₦40,000,000	₦45,000,000
	Governorship	₦2,500,000	₦20,000,000	₦22,500,000
	Senate	₦1,000,000	₦6,000,000	₦7,000,000
	House of Reps	₦350,000	₦3,500,000	₦3,850,000
	House of Assembly	₦100,000	₦750,000	₦850,000
PDP	President	₦2,000,000	₦10,000,000	₦12,000,000
	Governorship	₦1,000,000	₦5,000,000	₦6,000,000
	Senate	₦500,000	₦3,500,000	₦4,000,000
	House of Reps	₦500,000	₦1,000,000	₦1,500,000
	House of Assembly	₦100,000	₦500,000	₦600,000

**Source:** Author's Compilation with data from APC & PDP Press Releases 2019

For instance, in the last 2019 general elections, the prices of nominations and expression of interest forms were too high in political parties, especially in the APC and PDP. The two parties were chosen because APC is the ruling party and PDP is the main opposition party. It technically implies that young Nigerians who are even without jobs cannot vie for any office in the country, where according to National Bureau of Statistics (2019) general unemployment is 23.1% and youth unemployment stood at 36.5%.

These expressions for interest and nomination forms for election into various political offices were very costly running into millions of Naira, which can be seen as another way of institutionally closing the political space. The worst is the ruling party who claimed to be for the masses and promised change but rather did the opposite in this context. Some of the disadvantages of the high cost of the forms in the political process are; monetization of politics, encouraging corruption, parochialism, godfatherism and above all, a reversal to the political exclusion of the young people in the system. Democratic consolidation is undermined by this new barrier to political participation.

The prospects of the NTYTR Policy could be seen in the areas of inclusive politics, generational change and sustained youth political mobilization, ideological vibrancy, public intellectualism, use of social media to bring change, and political legitimacy to the government. The end result is democratic consolidation in the long run. "The #NotTooYoungToRun movement presents a model for citizens' activism, because, for the first time in my life and that of so many Nigerians, I see Nigerians uniting across religious, ethnic and political lines driven by one goal-youth political inclusion. That to me is the Nigerian spirit that we all need" (Mbamalu, 2018).



**Figure 2.** Not Too Young To Run Movement: Before and After  
**Source:** YIAGA Factsheet 2019

Since the attainment of independence in 1960, this is the first time in Nigeria young people between the ages of 25 to 30 are legally empowered to contest for seats in the Houses of Assemblies and Representatives.

So far out of the 991 legislators, only 68 are between 31-35 ages which represent 6.08 %. Even though, there are 22 direct beneficiaries of the Not Too Young To Run Law in the 2019 general elections. The speakers of the States of Kwara, Plateau, Oyo and Zamfara are below 35 years (Faruk, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to assess the impact and challenges of the implementation of the *Not Too Young To Run* Policy after the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. The main objective of the study is to examine how the NTYTR policy expanded youth space and political participation in Nigeria thereby promoting youth inclusion in governance and decision making in order to consolidate democracy. The bill was passed by the National Assembly in 2018 to alter Sections; 65, 106, 131, 177 of the 1999 Constitution. The bill succeeded in reducing the age qualification for public offices in Nigeria as follows; the President from 40 to 30 years; Governor from 35 to 30 years; Senator from 35 to 30 years; House of Representatives membership from 30 to 25 years and State House of Assembly membership from 30 to 25 years respectively.

The NTYTR policy has shown that political exclusion and marginalization as the two major challenges affecting youth in politics in Nigeria have been addressed by amending the discriminatory sections of the 1999 Constitution as earlier mentioned. Youth participation in politics increased from 21% in 2015 to 34.2% in 2019 and at the same time, 51.1% of the total registered voters in Nigeria in 2019 were the youth.

The policy has empowered the youth to ask for more like Oliver Twist; engage in youth work, seek for the implementation of the Youth Affirmative Action (YAA 30%), sustain the campaign to the grassroots and to trigger action on generational consciousness for the common interest of the youth. Finally, according to Bertolt Brecht, a German dramatist (1898-1956)

*The worst illiterate is the political illiterate, he doesn't hear, doesn't speak, nor participates in the political events. He doesn't know the cost of living, the price of the beans, of the fish, of the flour, of the rent, of the shoes and of the medicine, all depends on political decisions. The political illiterate is so stupid that he is proud and swells his chest saying that he hates politics. The imbecile doesn't know that, from his political ignorance is born the prostitute, the abandoned child, and the worst thieves of all, the bad politician, corrupted and flunky of the national and multinational companies".*

Therefore, the youth can only effect change if they actively participate in the political process. This is what this new law seeks to achieve by expanding the spaces for youth inclusion in politics in Nigeria after two decades of the un-interrupted democratic experiment.

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