

# A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF YOUTH POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Political apathy among youths has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges confronting Nigeria's democratic stability and socio-political development in Southern Nigeria. Despite constituting over 60% of Nigeria's population, youth participation in formal political structures remains disproportionately low, manifested in limited voter turnout, weak party engagement, negligible representation in elective offices, and a high level of institutional distrust. Structural constraints continue to marginalise young Nigerians and deter them from engaging in mainstream political activities. Cultural norms reinforcing elder authority further diminish youth agency linked to low political efficacy and a deep cynicism toward political institutions. However, youth political disengagement is not uniformly passive. Evidence from the #EndSARS movement in Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Enugu demonstrates that Southern Nigerian youths possess significant political consciousness and mobilisation capacity, especially within digital and informal spaces. In the South-South, social media activism and issue-based mobilisation increasingly substitute for formal participation, while in the South-West, digital political behaviour is reshaping civic engagement patterns. This indicates a structural shift rather than a decline in political interest. Drawing on political participation theory, youth bulge theory, and structural exclusion theory, this paper argues that youth apathy reflects a rational response to systemic exclusion rather than a lack of political will. The paper analyses the sociological causes, manifestations, and regional dynamics of youth political apathy and assesses its consequences in Southern Nigeria. The study concludes by proposing structural, educational, and digital reforms aimed at reintegrating youths into governance processes and strengthening democratic consolidation in the region.*

**Keywords:** Political Participation, Disengagement, Youth, Development, Sociological.

## 1. Introduction

Political participation has been adjudged as one of the drivers of the democratic processes and absence of it can be described as political apathy. Youth political apathy is one of the most obvious socio-political problems in Nigeria and Southern Nigeria in particular, despite demographic evidence suggesting that the youthful population make up over 60 percent of Nigeria's population (Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023). Interestingly, this demographic advantage does not correlate with their political representation, primarily because young people are evidently underrepresented in elective positions in Nigeria. Despite the brilliance performance of Nigerian youths in the digital communication/IT, entertainment and sports globally and locally the youths in Nigeria have

been reduced to errand boys in the political space.

Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, (2025) in their work argued that the source of youth political apathy can be traced to Nigeria's post-1999 political arrangements which created institutional and structural barriers to youth participation because of its dominance by elites, high cost of nomination fees, and closed internal party politics. This position is closely linked to Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, (2023) submissions who linked socio-economic challenges such unemployment, poverty and cost of political participation as the causes of political apathy among youths in Nigeria. Vite, Stephen, Gbimoie, & Ignatius, (2020) theory provides some insights to the above when they submitted that political participation is affected by the availability of social resources, civic skills and other assets.

In the south-west Odunlami cited in Erubami et al., (2021) observed that political awareness is high compared other parts of southern Nigeria because of access too media, ICT literacy and access to the internet. Despite this political awareness, Olaitan, (2024) argued that it has not brought about increase in political engagement of youths in the region hence the absence of institutional powers among youths. Olaitan, (2024) argued further that this frustration saw to the emergence of the #EndSARS protest. In the South-East Erubami, Bebenimibo, & Ohaja, (2021) identified political cynicism. Media manipulation, and distrusts as causes of political disengagement among youth while Ngene et al., (2024) identified poor political education and poor leadership, socio-political tension and security challenges as probable factors responsible for youth disengagement. While in the South-South Odalonu & Aghahowa, (2025) argued that poor political participation among youths is associated with historical disagreements, distrust in political actors, disenfranchisement. They however noted that there is significant level of awareness which is displayed online but doesn't translate into actual political engagement.

Based on the above it is evident that political apathy among youths in Southern Nigeria is not due to lack of interest but a systemic and structural disengagement. Having a clear understanding of these provides the bedrock for discussing the causes, manifestations, and consequences of youth political apathy in Southern Nigeria.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Despite constituting majority of the population, youths in Southern Nigeria like in other parts of Nigeria are mostly disengaged from formal political leadership. National statistics indicates that youth occupy less than one percent of elective positions, displaying an obvious gap between population statistics and political representation among youths in Nigeria (NDR Report, 2025). Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, (2025) argued that despite the Not-Too-Young-To-Run Act aimed at increasing youth participation in Nigeria, youths continue

to face challenges such as cost of nomination fees, godfatherism, heavily gerontocratic party hierarchies.

The disengagement of youths is further strengthened by high level socio-economic inequality which has created vulnerable youths. Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, (2023) identified high unemployment rates and high level of poverty as factors affecting limited income reduce the ability of young people to participate in costly political processes, thereby lowering their political efficacy and sense of agency (Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023). In the South-East, empirical studies show low efficacy and high political cynicism driven by distrust in political information environments, contributing significantly to apathy (Erubami, Bebenimibo, & Ohaja, 2021). Related research in Ebonyi State identifies poor political orientation and leadership failures as key factors responsible for youth disengagement (Ngene et al., 2024).

The South-South presents an additional challenge rooted in historical grievances and environmental neglect. While social media promotes political awareness, misinformation and the absence of institutional pathways hinder the transformation of digital activism into formal participation (Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025). Meanwhile, electoral volatility across parts of the South has produced patterns of "constrained optimism," where youths retain democratic ideals but strategically limit participation due to perceived risks (Davis & Turnbull, 2024).

Thus, the central problem is not youth disinterest but a fundamental structural misalignment between youth political agency and the institutional opportunities available to them. Without meaningful reforms, this misalignment will continue to weaken democratic consolidation, entrench gerontocracy, and undermine socio-political development across Southern Nigeria.

## Objectives of the Study

The overarching aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive sociological analysis of political apathy among youths in Southern Nigeria and to evaluate its implications for socio-political development across the

South-West, South-East, and South-South zones. The specific objectives of the study are:  
To examine the sociological factors responsible for political apathy among youths in Southern Nigeria.

To analyse how political apathy influences socio-political development in the region.

To assess the structural, cultural, and economic barriers that impede youth political participation in Southern Nigeria.

To evaluate the impact of youth disillusionment and institutional distrust on democratic processes.

To compare the manifestations and drivers of youth political apathy across the South-West, South-East, and South-South geopolitical zones.

To propose evidence-based strategies and policy recommendations for enhancing youth political engagement.

### Research Questions

Based on the identified gaps and the objectives of the study, the following research questions guide the investigation:

What sociological factors are responsible for political apathy among youths in Southern Nigeria?

How does political apathy influence socio-political development in the Southern Nigeria?

What are the structural, cultural, and economic barriers that impede youth political participation in Southern Nigeria?

What is the the impact of youth disillusionment and institutional distrust on democratic processes in Southern Nigeria?

What are the manifestations and drivers of youth political apathy across the South-West, South-East, and South-South geopolitical zones?

What are the evidence-based strategies and policy recommendations for enhancing youth political engagement in Southern Nigeria?

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and sociological research design, appropriate for examining the complex social, cultural, and institutional factors shaping youth political apathy in Southern Nigeria. Qualitative inquiry is well suited to this research because

political apathy is not simply a behavioural trait that can be measured quantitatively; rather, it is a multidimensional phenomenon embedded in structural conditions, historical experiences, and socio-political contexts. The study therefore relies on content analysis and document review to interpret existing scholarly evidence, policy reports, and empirical studies relevant to youth political participation.

Data for this research were drawn exclusively from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic theses, government publications, policy briefs, and reputable media analyses. These sources were selected based on four criteria: (1) direct relevance to youth political behaviour, apathy, or participation in Nigeria; (2) specific focus on the South-West, South-East, or South-South; (3) empirical credibility, evidenced by publication through established academic or policy institutions; and (4) publication within the democratic period (1999–2025), during which Nigeria experienced significant youth-state tensions.

The analysis employed a three-stage coding procedure. First, all documents were read to identify recurring concepts such as political efficacy, gerontocracy, structural exclusion, digital mobilisation, and civic disillusionment. Second, these concepts were grouped into thematic clusters representing structural, cultural, economic, and psychological determinants of apathy. Third, a comparative regional lens was applied to identify variations across the three Southern zones, allowing the study to highlight region-specific manifestations of disengagement.

To ensure analytical validity, data were triangulated across multiple independent sources, enabling the study to cross-verify findings related to exclusionary party practices, media influence, digital activism, and regional civic orientations. Because this study does not involve human participants and relies solely on publicly available documents, ethical clearance was not required.

Overall, this methodology provides a rigorous foundation for interrogating the sociological dynamics of youth political apathy and enables

a nuanced interpretation of its implications for socio-political development within Southern Nigeria.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework

This study synthesises Political Participation Theory, Youth Bulge Theory, Structural Exclusion Theory, and communication-era lenses on Media Effects and Digital Mobilisation, alongside the notion of constrained optimism, to explain youth political apathy and its regional specificities across Southern Nigeria. Political Participation Theory holds that engagement depends on resources (time, money, civic skills), psychological engagement (interest, efficacy), and mobilisation networks; Nigerian syntheses show that youth deficits in these domains—especially money and efficacy—depress formal participation even where interest is high, producing a strategic shift toward lower-barrier repertoires rather than genuine disinterest (Vite, Stephen, Gbimoie, & Ignatius, 2020). In this logic, “apathy” often masks selective disengagement from costly or distrusted arenas, not a withdrawal from politics per se (Vite et al., 2020).

Youth Bulge Theory adds a demographic mechanism: when a large youth cohort faces limited political and economic absorption, frustration, extra-institutional activism, and low descriptive representation are predictable outcomes; analyses of the Fourth Republic locate Nigeria squarely within this tension, illuminating protest waves and the persistence of low youth emergence across Southern zones (Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023). Structural Exclusion Theory then identifies how party finance, patronage recruitment, and gerontocratic norms act as gatekeeping devices that filter out first-time youth aspirants at the point of emergence, which is why age-threshold reforms like Not-Too-Young-To-Run have yielded modest representational gains without deeper party-system change (Nnubia & Ajisebiyayo, 2025).

To account for regional variation, the framework integrates communication-centred lenses. In the South-East, Media Effects research shows that newspaper use can boost

political efficacy, yet perceived bias or shallow coverage fosters cynicism and withdrawal—clarifying how informed audiences may still disengage from formal politics under adverse information environments (Erubami, Bebenimibo, & Ohaja, 2021). In the South-South, Digital Mobilisation findings indicate that social media substantially raises awareness and interest, but misinformation, limited two-way interactivity with officials, and entrenched distrust create conversion bottlenecks from online expression to institutional participation (Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025).

The #EndSARS episode exemplifies networked mobilisation in Southern cities—Lagos, Port Harcourt, Enugu—where youths coordinated logistics, fundraising, and messaging outside parties, selecting arenas with lower gatekeeping and higher perceived impact (Olaitan, 2024). Finally, in volatile electoral contexts, youth conduct is well described as “constrained optimism”: young citizens retain democratic commitments and self-efficacy yet adapt how and when they participate under low responsiveness and perceived risk, nuancing generic claims of apathy (Davis & Turnbull, 2024).

#### 5. Sociological Literature Review

The body of literature on youth engagement in politics in Nigeria centres on a core contradiction: a numerically significant youth cohort is consistently marginalised in formal politics, even as it displays strong mobilising potential in informal and digital domains (Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023; Vite, Stephen, Gbimoie, & Ignatius, 2020). National-level syntheses trace this gap to compounding obstacles—financial instability, restrictive party control and costly nomination processes, gerontocratic political cultures, and diminishing confidence in public systems—that collectively depress youth turnout, candidacy, and party membership despite high political interest (Nnubia & Ajisebiyayo, 2025; NDR Report, 2025). The literature also emphasises a shift in participation modes: many youths channel energy toward less restrictive platforms (social media, protest coalitions, community advocacy) when formal channels

appear expensive or indifferent, questioning the belief that apathy equals indifference (Vite et al., 2020; Olaitan, 2024).

**Structural Exclusion and Youth Disengagement**

Large-N analyses and integrative reviews consistently identify structural exclusion as a principal driver of youth withdrawal from formal politics. National-level evidence reveals that high cost of nomination fees, clientelistic financing arrangements, and opaque primary processes function as “institutional filters” that screen out first-time youth aspirants early in the political pipeline, thereby sustaining leadership deficits that legal reforms such as the Not Too Young To Run Act have not resolved (Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025; NDR Report, 2025). Political Participation Theory is frequently invoked to explain how shortfalls in resources (time, money, civic competencies), weak recruitment pathways, and low efficacy diminish participation; contemporary Nigerian syntheses further argue that young cohorts often reallocate participation toward non-electoral spaces when formal institutions appear unresponsive (Vite et al., 2020; Adeniji & Odeyemi, 2023). Complementary qualitative studies on violent or unstable electoral environments nuance blanket “apathy” claims by demonstrating that many youths retain democratic commitments but adjust their behaviour under conditions of risk—what recent literature calls “constrained optimism” (Davis & Turnbull, 2024; Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023).

**Regionally Differentiated Patterns—South-West**

Studies grounded in the South-West often emphasise the role of media ecologies and urban political culture. Evidence drawn from university populations indicates that electronic media (particularly television and internet) shape political awareness and behaviour more than print among South-West undergraduates, with exposure predicting higher knowledge and engagement—even if this does not always translate into sustained party participation or candidacy (Odunlami, cited in Erubami, Bebenimibo, & Ohaja, 2021; Vite et al., 2020). Lagos—as a media capital and

#EndSARS nerve centre—features prominently in accounts of networked mobilisation, logistics innovation, and agenda-setting outside party structures, reinforcing arguments that youths use digital repertoires when institutional channels are distrusted (Olaitan, 2024; Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023). National leadership and representation audits further suggest that—even in relatively affluent South-West states—youth descriptive representation remains marginal, consistent with findings that less than one percent of elective offices is held by youths nationwide (NDR Report, 2025; Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025).

**Regionally Differentiated Patterns—South-East**

Empirical work specific to the South-East emphasises political efficacy, media perceptions, and orientation deficits as key correlates of apathy. A survey-based study reports that obtaining political news from newspapers correlates with higher feelings of political efficacy among youths; however, perceived bias or lack of depth in coverage is associated with cynicism and reduced willingness to participate, illustrating a media-malaise mechanism (Erubami et al., 2021; Vite et al., 2020). Complementary research in Ebonyi State finds that poor political orientation and leadership failures significantly depress participation, with respondents citing inadequate civic education and weak trust in public institutions as proximate drivers—findings that echo broader national concerns about civic capacity and institutional legitimacy (Ngene, Otu, Bassey, Obiukwu, & Igwe, 2024; Adeniji & Odeyemi, 2023). The South-East literature also situates apathy within a fraught security context and polarised information environment, factors that heighten risk perceptions and lower expected returns to engagement—conditions under which the “constrained optimism” lens plausibly applies (Davis & Turnbull, 2024; Erubami et al., 2021).

**Regionally Differentiated Patterns—South-South**

The South-South’s distinct political economy—oil extraction, environmental

grievances, and histories of civic agitation—features in analyses of youth repertoires. Recent quantitative work shows social media significantly boosts political awareness and interest among young people in the Niger Delta, but misinformation, limited interactivity with officials, and persistent distrust inhibit conversion to offline, institutional participation (Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025; Vite et al., 2020). The region’s protest traditions and collective action infrastructures are reflected in accounts of #EndSARS expansion to Port Harcourt and other South-South cities, where youths coordinated large-scale demonstrations while remaining sceptical of party-centred politics (Olaitan, 2024; Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025). National participation audits reinforce that even where mobilisation is strong, descriptive representation lags—consistent with broader patterns of structural exclusion faced by youths countrywide (NDR Report, 2025; Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023).

### **Apathy vs. Repertoire Change**

#### **Interpreting #EndSARS**

The #EndSARS movement has become a touchstone for evaluating the “apathy” label. Scholarly treatments argue that the scale, trans-regional spread, and organisational sophistication of the protests demonstrate high levels of youth political competence; rather than apathy, what is observed is a re-routing of political effort toward arenas with lower gatekeeping and higher perceived impact (Olaitan, 2024; Vite et al., 2020). In Lagos (SW), Enugu (SE), and Port Harcourt (SS), protest coalitions exhibited digital fund-raising, legal aid coordination, and strategic messaging that rivalled formal organisations—yet subsequent conversion to candidacy, legislative presence, or institutionalised policy voice remained limited, due to enduring party gatekeeping and resource barriers (Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025; NDR Report, 2025). This evidence underwrites a central claim in the literature: youth political apathy in Southern Nigeria is selective disengagement from formal politics, not an absence of political interest or capacity (Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023; Davis & Turnbull, 2024).

### **Civic Education, Political Knowledge, and Institutional Trust**

Several studies link apathy to deficits in civic knowledge and weak understanding of representative institutions. Mixed-method research with NYSC members and civic groups reveals low knowledge of legislative processes and scepticism toward representative democracy among youths, contributing to disengagement from contacting legislators or participating in committee hearings (Adeniji & Odeyemi, 2023; Vite et al., 2020). State-level work in the South-East echoes these patterns, advocating sustained public orientation and people-centred leadership as remedies for apathy (Ngene et al., 2024; Erubami et al., 2021). National audits similarly argue that without institutional incentives—party quotas, transparent primaries, public funding rules that favour new entrants—youth candidacy surges do not translate into durable representation (NDR Report, 2025; Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025).

### **Economic Constraints and the Monetisation of Politics**

A robust theme is the material barrier posed by the monetised structure of Nigerian elections. Content analyses show that the cost of nomination forms, campaign logistics, and patronage-driven party finance deters first-time youth aspirants, including in relatively prosperous South-West states (Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025; Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023). The NILDS-linked reporting highlights that, despite large youth voter shares, representation remains below one percent, implying that economic and organisational barriers, not just age thresholds, limit youth emergence (NDR Report, 2025; Vite et al., 2020). These findings reinforce Participation Theory’s emphasis on resource endowments as prerequisites for competitive engagement in formal politics.

### **Violence, Risk, and Adapted Participation**

Literature on violent electoral environments adds an essential layer: where elections are prone to intimidation or clashes, young citizens often recalibrate participation, maintaining commitment to democratic norms

while altering the intensity and modes of engagement—what has been framed as “constrained optimism” (Davis & Turnbull, 2024; Adeniji & Odeyemi, 2023). This helps explain why some youths sustain voting intentions or civic duty narratives yet remain reluctant to seek candidacy or invest in party structures, especially in locales with recent conflict memories or heavy-handed policing—dynamics observable across Southern urban centres in the post-#EndSARS period (Olaitan, 2024; Nnubia & Ajisebiyayo, 2025).

### Policy Instruments and Reform Debates

A growing strand of scholarship evaluates reform tools capable of reducing apathy and deepening inclusion. Analyses of the Not-Too-Young-To-Run Act argue that age-threshold reductions are necessary but insufficient without party-system reforms (transparent primaries, fee caps, compliance audits) and state-backed instruments linking public funding to youth inclusion benchmarks (NDR Report, 2025; Obani, 2024). Parallel work on national youth policy and civic voluntarism advocates integrated interventions—youth leadership pipelines, advisory councils in state ministries, and technology-enabled participation platforms—to convert digital voice into institutional power (Eboigbe & Ajisebiyayo, 2024; Vite et al., 2020). Evidence from the South-South specifically recommends digital literacy, content regulation collaborations, and two-way engagement channels to curb misinformation and improve responsiveness, thereby increasing the conversion rate from online to offline participation (Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025; Olaitan, 2024).

### Synthesis: What the Literature Establishes

Across the Southern zones, the literature establishes four robust propositions. First, youth “apathy” is predominantly structural, rooted in resource deficits, exclusionary party architectures, and low institutional trust; it is not a simple lack of political interest (Nnubia & Ajisebiyayo, 2025; Vite et al., 2020). Second, repertoires are shifting: youths increasingly prefer digital and protest-based participation where gatekeeping

is lower and expressive returns higher (Olaitan, 2024; Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023). Third, regional media and risk ecologies matter: efficacy-mediated media effects are salient in the South-East, while digital mobilisation capacities and conversion bottlenecks are especially visible in the South-South (Erubami et al., 2021; Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025). Fourth, without institutional reforms, demographic weight will not translate into representation; descriptive participation remains below one percent absent incentives, quotas, or financing rules that lower entry costs (NDR Report, 2025; Obani, 2024).

Taken together, the Southern Nigeria literature portrays political apathy as structured disengagement rather than civic atrophy. It shows youths acting as rational political agents who evaluate costs, risks, and expected returns across arenas, often concluding that formal politics offers diminished payoff relative to digital and protest-based action. The following section builds on these insights to analyse causal pathways and manifestations of apathy across South-West, South-East, and South-South, and to trace developmental impacts on democratic consolidation, leadership renewal, and policy responsiveness.

## 6. Analysis and Discussion

Youth political apathy in Southern Nigeria results from a combination of structural exclusion, socioeconomic vulnerability, institutional distrust, and shifting political repertoires. Across the three Southern zones, these drivers interact to create patterns of disengagement that differ in form but share a common root: political structures that consistently discourage youth participation. Research across Nigeria shows that party gatekeeping, monetised primaries, and gerontocratic leadership traditions remain the strongest filters preventing youth emergence (Nnubia & Ajisebiyayo, 2025). National legislative audits confirm this marginalisation, noting that youths hold less than one percent of elective positions despite constituting most registered voters (NDR Report, 2025). These exclusionary structures depress youth motivation to engage in mainstream politics.

Socioeconomic barriers further

entrench disengagement. Youth unemployment and financial insecurity limit the resources needed for political participation and reduce political efficacy, as documented in national and zone-specific syntheses (Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023; Vite et al., 2020). These constraints shape youth behaviour most clearly in the South-West, where political awareness is high but political conversion remains low. Evidence from South-West university populations show that electronic media strongly shapes political knowledge and interest, yet structural barriers continue to prevent meaningful engagement (Odunlami cited in Erubami et al., 2021). Thus, in the South-West, apathy manifests not as disengagement from politics entirely, but as a withdrawal from costly, elite-dominated platforms such as party primaries and candidacy.

In the South-East, political apathy emerges through a different mechanism: reduced political efficacy and distrust in information systems. Survey research shows that although newspaper exposure can increase political efficacy, perceived bias, superficial coverage, and media cynicism are strongly correlated with disengagement (Erubami et al., 2021). State-level work in Ebonyi reinforces this pattern, emphasising poor political orientation and leadership failures as key drivers of apathy (Ngene et al., 2024). These findings pinpoint civic education and information quality as central issues in the South-East, where youths often express political interest through discussion and online activity but disengage from formal institutional participation due to low trust.

The South-South zone presents yet another distinct profile. Here, historical injustices, environmental degradation, and governance failures create deep institutional distrust. Quantitative evidence shows that social media significantly boosts political awareness among Niger Delta youths, but misinformation, limited government responsiveness, and the absence of institutional bridges between online engagement and offline participation block political conversion (Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025). This region also

demonstrated strong mobilisation during #EndSARS, particularly in Port Harcourt, illustrating capacity for collective action despite formal disengagement (Olaitan, 2024).

The #EndSARS protests across Lagos (South-West), Enugu (South-East), and Port Harcourt (South-South) provide the clearest evidence that youth apathy is selective disengagement, not political disinterest. Protest logistics—fundraising, legal aid coordination, message discipline—demonstrated high civic competence and political agency (Olaitan, 2024). The inability of this civic energy to translate into sustained institutional representation underscores the structural barriers documented earlier: monetised politics, party gatekeeping, and gerontocracy (Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025; NDR Report, 2025).

Research on violent electoral environments further nuances these findings. Many young Nigerians maintain democratic ideals but adapt their participation due to fear, risk perception, or expectations of manipulation. This behaviour pattern—labelled “constrained optimism”—indicates that youths are not apathetic but risk-aware and strategically cautious (Davis & Turnbull, 2024). This is particularly relevant in the South-East, where security tensions elevate the perceived costs of participation.

Across the Southern zones, the cumulative effect of these factors is a three-stage chain: structural exclusion reduces youth trust and efficacy; low trust produces selective disengagement from formal politics; and selective disengagement weakens accountability, leadership renewal, and policy responsiveness. This chain aligns with national participation theories and regional empirical evidence (Vite et al., 2020; Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023). Understanding these dynamics clarifies the need for structural reforms, capacity-building, and institutional mechanisms to convert youth political energy into durable influence.

## 7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that youth political apathy in Southern Nigeria is best understood as structured disengagement

rather than indifference: a rational response to monetised party systems, gerontocratic gatekeeping, resource constraints, and low institutional trust that depress the expected returns to formal participation (Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025; Vite, Stephen, Gbimoie, & Ignatius, 2020). While youths comprise a demographic majority, national audits show they hold less than one percent of elective offices, underscoring that legal age reforms are insufficient without party-system change (NDR Report, 2025). The evidence therefore locates apathy in institutions and opportunity structures, not in a lack of political capacity.

Regionally, the South-West exhibits high political awareness and sophisticated digital coordination but low conversion to party membership and candidacy because candidacy emergence remains mediated by finance and elite brokerage (Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023; Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025). In the South-East, efficacy deficits and information-environment effects—especially cynicism stemming from perceived bias or shallow coverage—depress motivation to participate, while weak civic orientation reinforces learned withdrawal (Erubami, Bebenimibo, & Ohaja, 2021; Ngene, Otu, Basse, Obiukwu, & Igwe, 2024). The South-South displays robust digital activism and issue mobilisation, yet misinformation, limited two-way interaction with officials, and longstanding distrust hinder translation into institutional participation (Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025).

The #EndSARS episode across Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Enugu revealed considerable youth civic competence—crowd-funding, legal aid, message discipline—thereby challenging the “apathy” label and strengthening the claim that youth gravitate to arenas with lower gatekeeping and higher perceived impact (Olaitan, 2024). At the same time, scholarship on violent or volatile electoral settings shows many young citizens retain democratic commitment while adjusting behaviour under risk, a pattern of constrained optimism that helps explain guarded participation in parts of the South after episodes of state violence or intimidation (Davis & Turnbull, 2024).

Sustained socio-political development in Southern Nigeria thus requires institutional rewiring (transparent primaries, capped nomination fees, youth quotas), capacity rebuilding (civic education and political orientation), and bridges from digital voice to institutional power (e-petition portals, participatory budgeting with guaranteed feedback). These remedies directly target the causal chain identified in the literature: structural exclusion → low efficacy/trust → selective disengagement → thinner accountability and stalled leadership renewal (Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025; NDR Report, 2025; Vite et al., 2020). Implemented together—and tailored to SW, SE, and SS media and mobilisation ecologies—these reforms can convert youth energy into durable representation, strengthen democratic consolidation, and accelerate inclusive development in Southern Nigeria (Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023; Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025).

## 8. Recommendations

Drawing from the findings across the South-West, South-East, and South-South zones, this section proposes multi-level, evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing youth political apathy, strengthening democratic governance, and improving socio-political development. The recommendations align with patterns identified in scholarly work, including the structural exclusion documented in national appraisals, the regional variations in efficacy and media influence in the South-East, the digital mobilisation trends in the South-South, and the broader participation bottlenecks outlined in theoretical syntheses of youth engagement in Nigeria.

### Reform Party Primaries and Nomination Systems

Youth exclusion is driven largely by monetised primaries and elite gatekeeping, which prevent young aspirants from emerging within political parties (Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025). To address this, political parties in Southern Nigeria should adopt transparent primaries, enforce financial caps on nomination

fees, and establish compliance audits. These steps are essential, given national evidence showing youths occupy less than one percent of elective offices (NDR Report, 2025).

### **Introduce Youth Quotas**

Inclusion quotas for party leadership and candidate lists (20–30%) would counter persistent gerontocracy and improve representational balance. Research on structural exclusion affirms that without targeted incentives, youth representation will remain stagnant (Obani, 2024).

### **Expand Civic Education (South-East Priority)**

Low political efficacy and weak civic orientation significantly drive apathy in the South-East (Erubami et al., 2021). States should integrate practical civic modules into secondary and tertiary curricula and fund political orientation campaigns. Findings from Ebonyi show that inadequate civic education directly correlates with withdrawal from formal politics (Ngene et al., 2024).

### **Institutionalise Digital Participation Platforms (South-South Priority)**

Digital mobilisation in the South-South does not convert effectively into offline engagement due to misinformation and limited interactivity with officials (Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025). States should establish e-petition portals, virtual town halls, and participatory budgeting dashboards to translate online activism into institutional channels.

### **Promote Digital Literacy and Counter-Misinformation**

Given the risks of misinformation documented in Niger Delta youth political spaces (Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2025), states should implement fact-checking training and media literacy programmes through universities and civil society organizations.

### **Provide Youth-Targeted Political Funding**

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Since resource constraints are a major predictor of apathy (Vite et al., 2020), state governments should establish Youth Political Empowerment Funds to support campaign training and logistics for first-time aspirants.

### **Improve Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship**

Youth unemployment weakens political efficacy and discourages engagement; improving economic stability would enhance political motivation (Akinrolabu & Imoukhuede, 2023).

### **Strengthen Electoral Security**

Where elections are volatile, youths behave with “constrained optimism,” limiting participation for safety reasons (Davis & Turnbull, 2024). Implementing community policing and secure polling protocols can mitigate risk.

### **Improve Government Transparency**

Distrust remains a major cause of apathy across all three zones. Publishing budget reports, constituency project trackers, and performance dashboards can rebuild youth trust (Nnubia & Ajisebiyawo, 2025).

### **Link Activism to Policy Influence**

#EndSARS demonstrated high youth mobilisation capacity (Olaitan, 2024). States should create youth advisory councils and legislative internships to convert protest energy into sustained political influence.

These recommendations directly respond to the causal mechanisms identified across the literature: structural exclusion, low efficacy, socioeconomic hardship, digital mobilisation bottlenecks, and fragile trust in institutions. If implemented, they offer a coherent path toward inclusive, youth-responsive political development in Southern Nigeria.

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