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# WOMEN REPRESENTATION AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: A STUDY OF THE FOURTH REPUBLIC (1999-2023)

**Timothy Onimisi**

Department of Political Science,  
Federal University Lokoja,  
P.M. 1154, Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria  
[timothy.onimisi@fulokoja.edu.ng](mailto:timothy.onimisi@fulokoja.edu.ng)

## Abstract

*Nigeria is one of the countries in Africa with the lowest number of women's representation in politics, despite having a 35% Affirmative Action. Women in Nigeria make up about half of the population and about 51 percent of voters during elections, but in terms of women's representation in the Fourth Republic (1999-2023), it remains low. This study examines the challenges affecting the effective implementation of the 35% Affirmative Action in Nigeria. The research adopted feminism as a theoretical framework and reviews some related literature that are in line with women in politics. The research utilized a combination of survey methods to collect primary quantitative data and secondary research to analyze existing information. The findings revealed that high illiteracy levels among women, cultural and religious beliefs, poverty, and negative perception of women in politics were the major challenges to the effective implementation of the National Gender Policy of 35% Affirmative Action. The paper recommended the need for a gender quota system with constitutional backing and public enlightenment programmes.*

**Keywords:** *Affirmative Action, Fourth Republic, Politics, Representation, Women*

## Introduction

In Nigeria, half of the national population are Women, despite that, the representation of women in politics is still at 6.7% in both elective and appointive positions in accordance to the Gender Strategy Advancement International (GSAI), (Yakubu, et al, 2022). Enjoying equal rights in term of politics, economic and educational aspect is very essential, equality being the condition in which all persons in a given society enjoy similar rights, status, freedoms, which also includes potential civil laws, freedom of speech and fair opportunities to certain public goods and services (Khan, 2021). Gender equality and women's right in Nigeria has become an issue that has been neglected by the government in both elective and appointive positions; which has led to the marginalization of women in both public and private life of the nation (Muhammed, 2006). Nigeria politics is predominantly a politics of men, the political arena is dominated by the male gender, the rules of the political games are formulated by men and who also define the standard for evaluation. Men continued to relegate women in all spheres of human endeavor such as economic, religious, social, and political activities (Ajibade et al, 2012). This situation has led to the clarion call for women to be empowered to enjoy their rights and status, which will enable them actively participate in political decision making process. The patriarchal nature of the society has made women to be subordinate to men, this has led to inferiority complex and the female gender being alienated from the mainstream of politics in Nigeria. The culture of violence, thuggery and intimidation in the Nigerian political system has made the participation of women in politics a dangerous adventure. Also, negative perception of women in politics, low or no access to

financial resources, etc. are some of the factors that restrict the participation of women in democratic governance in Nigeria (Makama, 2013).

The female gender is marginalized within the Nigerian economy, the provision of education, employment, religious centers, politics and other spheres of life. Despite their numerical strength (about 48.78%, NPC, 2006), it does not automatically increase women's participation in political activities in the country (Kukah, 2003). The society has always seen culture as the major reason for the denial of women's right and permanent relegation of women to the background in Nigeria. Some harmful cultural practices which has led to the relegation of Nigerian women include the female genital mutilation (FGM), widowhood practices, child brides or forced marriages, denial of inheritance and many other cases of abuse against women (Ayeni & Ajibogun, 2013). The quest of equal rights for women via international law has been a gradual undertaking. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights' Article 2 gave expression to the idea that everyone has the right to exercise that right "without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, and sex." The international community took years to develop a strong legal framework against gender inequity, notwithstanding the declaration's non-binding nature. Adopted in 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Ayeni & Ajibogun, 2013). This has been described as a bill of right for women; it spells out the area in which women experience discrimination and commits to amend their laws, construct national gender policies and create institutions to deliver them. The process of this follows the popular slogans of 'Women empowerment', 'Women liberation', 'Women equalization' etc. in different parts of the globe. A more recent positive development for women's right in full participation in governance was the 2011 launch of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment (Ayeni & Ajibogun, 2013).

The existence of women in a society throws up several issues which we refer to in this study as gender issues. However, when 'gender issues' as a term is used, it often connotes issues bordering on women, since the society has long been seen as man's world. Omenka (2017) put it succinctly that gender remains a cardinal element in our humanity, which cannot be wished away with any form of gusto. Woman's representation in Nigerian politics has been on a downward slide since 2011, and the 2023 elections has confirmed the expectations of poor outcomes for women. The number of women in Nigeria's National Assembly has fallen by nineteen percent compared to the last assembly, with women now occupying three percent of seats in the Senate and four percent in the House of Representatives (Omenka, 2017). Over time, several and the same factors have continued to be cited by experts as core reasons for the low female representation in Nigerian politics – whether at the national or state level (Dennis, 2023). Therefore, inclusive government cannot exist without non-discriminatory electoral participation, particularly when it comes to gender. Stated differently, equal chances must be granted to citizens so they can freely join political parties of their choice, register as voters, freely contest for elective positions and be eligible for vote without any inhibitions. It is in a bid to find a lasting solution to issues of women's misrepresentation in Nigeria political system which has led prompted the current paper.

### **Clarification of Key Term**

**Affirmative Action:** The National Gender Policy (NGP) has formulated a 35% Affirmative Action in Nigeria since 2006. This policy demands that 35% of women be involved in politics and democratic governance processes. Affirmative Action (AA) is seen as the policies that take care of race, ethnicity or gender into consideration in an attempt to promote

equal opportunities in political and socio-economic life. It can also be seen as a policy that is aimed at countering discrimination against the minorities and the disadvantaged social groups. According to Omenka (2017), AA is a policy strategy designed to correct an existing imbalance and prevent discrimination against a disadvantaged group or minority based on sex, religion or gender. Crosby Iyer, and Sncharoen (2006 as cited in Omenka, 2017), stated that AA occurs whenever an organization devote their resources (time and money) to making sure that people are not discriminated against on the basis of their gender or their ethnic groups. In relating to gender politics, AA is a strategy, measure or policy adopted to give equal opportunity to genders to have access to political positions and to prevent discrimination against any gender on occupation of any political or leadership positions. This policy is meant to ensure women are well represented in any political positions.

AA as it was introduced in Nigeria in the year 2000 and improved in the 2006 National Gender Policy. According to the 1995 Beijing Declaration, Nigeria's adoption of the National policy of 35% Affirmative Action for women is one of the several initiatives made to empower women in politics. Agbalajobi (2000), sees AA as a measure intended to supplement non-discrimination and to encompass a host of policies that seek to support weak groups in society especially women. The gender policy is a comprehensive document for total remodeling and transformation towards poverty reduction, which is tenable and equitable for growth, and the more reason why it is concatenated within the framework of the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), Gender equality will therefore address other essential goals within the context of (SEEDS) State Economic Empowerment and Development strategy, (LEED) Local Economic Empowerment and Development strategy and their likely response.

## **Theoretical Application**

### **Feminism Theory**

Feminism theory was designed originally to explain and address the growing issues faced by women generally, without considering their tribe, status, age, nationality, etc. As a theory, it has evolved over the years and can be seen in two major dimensions, which includes the particularizing and contextualizing the different experiences as they affect women, instead of the previous approach that universalized the struggle, therefore, losing the actual elements. The second dimension involves 'a shift from seeing women as a category, what makes up oppressive gender practices must be explored (Carlson and Ray, 2001). Feminism movements aimed at establishing, defending and defining equal political, economic, social rights and equal opportunities for women (Adadevoh, 2001). It can also be seen as the belief in the importance of gender equality, validating the idea of gender hierarchy as a socially - constructed concept (Iwuchukwu, 2006). Feminism is regarded as being controversial, and this misinterpreted by some scholars. It has been misunderstood by many as the intention of some aggressive women who are trying to be like men, who dress carelessly and abandon essential feminism attributes (Ezelgbo, 2013). The Liberal perspective on feminism proves the importance of equality, equality of men and women through political and legal reform without any change in the structure of the society. The theory has addressed the social problems of women by bringing them into appointments, like government positions, likewise occupation.

Feminism in Nigeria originated as a result of increase demand to improve the quality of lives of the Nigerian women. In Nigeria, records of women struggles to correct acts of

discrimination and violence have been in existence since the 19th century. Nigerian women have been recognized to play significant roles in anti-colonial struggles. The women in the Northern part of the country were not exempted, comprising mainly of the Hausa-Fulani whose commercial activities were restricted as a result of the use of the Islamic purdah. Despite this, they still made a strong impression on the socio-political landscape of the region. Some notable women like Queen Amina of Zazzau, asserted their rights and started their own feminist movements (Ezelgbo, 2013). She became the undisputed ruler of Zazzau in 1576, a Hausa city in Northern Nigeria. Nigeria is unquestionably a patriarchal society, with men ruling women in all domains due to the misconception that women are inherently less intellectual and physically gifted than men. As a result, society tends to discriminate against women. The assumption is also made that female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal restrictions that prevent women from entering and succeeding in the so-called public world. It has been against the law since 1999 for political parties in the nation to nominate women on an equal basis for party offices and elected positions like those up for election to the National Assembly (Ezelgbo, 2013). Nevertheless, they benefitted from every measure taken to boost the number of men in parliament. Two examples are the timing of political events, which usually occur at odd hours when women are caring for domestic responsibilities at home, and the nation's political violence, which disproportionately affects women because of their sensitivity.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted the survey and secondary research designs which is a quantitative method of research. The choice of this method is the fact that survey in a descriptive study is more appropriate in dealing with public feelings, opinions, and views in relation to analyzing the facts thereto. Secondary method on the other hand involves review of relevant documents such as textbooks, journals, periodicals and magazines to identify scholarly postulations on the subject of study. This approach was also adopted to empirically describes women and democratic governance in Nigeria, a study of Nigeria using a standardized well-structured designed questionnaire as research instrument and structured interview questions. This study employed multi-stage sampling technique. A total of 400 copies of structured designed questionnaire were administered. At first stage, the three senatorial districts of the state were identified, at the second stage, one local government each was randomly selected from the three senatorial districts, making a total of three in all. The researcher used simple frequency distribution in presenting data and used statistical analysis and simple percentage (%) in analyzing the data collected.

### **National Policy of 35% Affirmative Action for Women Representation in Politics and Democratic Governance in Nigeria**

Out of 376 participants in the survey, 90 representing 24% strongly agreed that women representation in Nigerian politics and democratic governance in Nigeria is mainly on appointment basis, 66 or 18% respondents agreed, 168 or 45% respondents strongly disagreed, 38 or 10% respondents disagreed, whereas, 14 or 3% respondents remained undecided. This indicates that majority of the respondents (168 or 45%) strongly disagree on the point that women are involved in public life in Nigeria as a result of appointment. The basic reason for arriving at this conclusion is basically because Nigeria is patriarchal in nature and most part of her public life has been dominated by the male genders. Out of 376 respondents in the survey, 81 representing (22%) indicated that women are involved in political governance through election, 155 (41%) by appointment and 140 (37%) agreed that women participate in political governance by both election and appointment. Majority of the

respondents agreed that women's involvement in political governance in Nigeria mainly by appointment. On evaluation whether there are enough women in Nigeria political leadership position and governance, the analysis shows that 26 or 7% respondents strongly agreed, 59 or 16% agreed, 208 or 55% respondents strongly disagreed, whereas, 83 or 22% disagreed.

The participants that said yes on average of women's involvement in political leadership positions and governance, the analysis shows that out of 256 participants, 150 representing (59%) agreed that women's involvement in political leadership positions and governance is between 1% - 10% on the average in Nigeria. 65 chose an average of 11%-20% of women's involvement in political leadership position and Governance, 31 said an average of 21%-30% of women are involved in political leadership position and Governance and 10 said 31-40% of women are involved in political leadership position and Governance in Nigeria. The finding indicates that an average of 1%-10% of women are involved in political leadership position and Governance in Nigeria, which show that the number of women in politics and democratic governance are still very low compared to their male counterparts in leadership positions in the state. In response to the question on women's participation in politics on equal basis with men in Nigeria, the analysis shows 25 or 17% respondents strongly agreed, 59 or 16% agreed, 187 or 49% respondents strongly disagreed, 98 or 26% disagreed, whereas, 7 or 2% respondents did not make any official contribution, which shows that they were undecided.

On evaluation whether people in Nigeria are aware of the 35% Affirmative Action, and 50 of the respondents representing 13% were aware of the National Policy of 35% AA for women, while 326 of the respondents representing 87% were not aware about the policy. This revealed clearly that the majority of the respondents had no knowledge about National Policy of 35% AA for women. This indicates that there is need for wider public sensitization in order to ensure proper implementation of the policy. From the analysis above, 90 respondents representing (24%) agreed that there is high level of compliance with the 35% Affirmative Action in Nigeria. 286 respondents representing (76%) believed that there is no compliance with the 35% Affirmative Action. This clearly indicates that the majority of the respondents disagreed that there was high level of compliance to National Policy of 35% AA for women in Nigeria.

### **Factors Militating against the Implementation of the National Policy of 35% Affirmative Action for Women Participation in Politics And Democratic Governance in Nigeria**

The data shows that 80% of the respondents agreed that, low level of education among women affects the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women for women political representation in Nigeria, while 20% disagreed. The analysis revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that low level of education hinder effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women in Nigeria. One of the male participants during the interview stated that: "Women in the state mostly in the olden days are not allowed to attain greater level of education, but are kept at home to be trained on how to take care of their future homes and families. Most women in the contemporary era who are educated have no interest in politics, but prefer other profession than go into politics". Another participant, who is a female politician and a councilor in the area also said the poor educational background of women is a challenge, she has this to say, "Many women in Nigeria have poor educational background. Many parents hardly train their female children to university level. Girl-child is not trained to the required level of education that can make them contend with their male counterparts in politics" (Female politician). Analysis, 26% and

69% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively that the cultural and traditional beliefs of Nigeria affects the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political representation, while only 3% and 2% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. This clearly revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that cultural and traditional beliefs hinder effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in Nigeria.

The society still believes that women should not be in political positions and not to be allowed to participate in decision-making process. People in the state still believe that no woman can achieve anything on merits without jumping from one bed to another"(Council Leader). 94% of the respondents agreed that, religious beliefs is one of the factors that undermines the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in Nigeria, while only 6% disagreed. This clearly revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that religious beliefs impeded the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women representation in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria. A survey on whether poverty among women hinders the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% Affirmative Action for women political participation in Nigeria. "A lot of women across the country and Nigeria in particular lack funding. Women are not financially empowered to be able to cope with the demanding funds needed for politics. The cost of purchasing nomination form, expression of interest form and other logistics that might be involved in politics. This clearly revealed that the slight majority of the respondents agreed that negative perception toward female politicians hindered the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in the state.

### **Factors To Enhance Effective Implementation Of The National Policy Of 35% Affirmative Action For Women Political Participation In Nigeria**

93% of the respondents agreed that, free and compulsory female education can enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in Nigeria, while only 7% disagreed. This clearly revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that free and compulsory female education can enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women participation in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria. 20% and 66% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively that, gender quota system and power rotation based on gender in political parties can enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in Nigeria, while only 5% and 9% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. This clearly revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that legalization of 35% gender quota system and gender power rotation in political parties will enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in Nigeria. that, 90.4% of the respondents agreed that demonetization of women leadership positions can enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in Nigeria, while only 9.6% disagreed. This clearly revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that demonetization of politics can enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in Nigeria.

87% of the respondents agreed that, women leadership training and support by NGOs and schools can enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for

women political participation in Nigeria, while only 13% disagreed. This indicates that majority of the respondents agreed that women leadership training and support by NGOs and schools can enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in Nigeria. 76% of the respondents agreed that, public sensitization by traditional rulers, religious leaders and government can enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women political participation in Nigeria, while only 24% disagreed. This clearly revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that public sensitization by traditional rulers, religious leaders and government can enhance the effective implementation of the National Policy of 35% AA for women participation in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria.

### **Discussion of Major Findings**

The findings of the paper agree with Lober (2005), which states that despite the enabling laws and adoption of the United Nations Beijing Platform for Action in Nigeria, the observers of Nigeria democracy have discovered a serious gap in women's involvement in political governance. The findings revealed that there was low level of women participation in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria. Out of 376 participants in the survey across Nigeria, 90 representing 24% strongly agreed on the statement above, 66 or 18% respondents agreed, 168 or 45% respondents strongly disagreed, 38 or 10% respondents disagreed, whereas, 14 or 3% respondents remained undecided. This indicates that majority of the respondents (168 or 45%) strongly disagree on the point that women are involved in public life in Nigeria. The basic reason for arriving at this conclusion is basically because Nigeria is patriarchal in nature and most part of her public life has been dominated by the male genders.

Nigeria women are still seen as 'followers' who are only expected to be mere caregivers and not given the chance to do what men are capable of doing (Eme et al, 2014). From onset, women believed that they are subordinate to men and this has relegated them to the background. From the pre-colonial period, women have been involved in public life of the country by playing some vital roles in agriculture, childbearing, informal and formal sector, etc. In agreement to this statement, Eme, et al,( 2014), opines that Nigeria is a society where men are in charge of the political participation, business, government and even the homes. The women are seen as those to key into whatever men says by their 'yes sir' and follow; they are expected to only be caregivers, especially to their husbands, and not given the chance to do what men do. Findings have revealed that women are capable and willing to contest and win election, if they are allowed by their families and society at large. Majority of women participate actively in registration and voting. As highlighted by Nwoye (2007, p 169), when women are in political positions, the society usually benefits from it and lead to state development.

The findings of the study also revealed that there is a strong significant relationship between the noncompliance with the 35% National Gender Policy Affirmative Action and low level of women representation in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria as indicated in the findings as respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively that, there was low level of women political participation in Nigeria, while only 13% and 13% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. This clearly indicates that the majority of the respondents strongly agreed that there was low level of women political representation in Nigeria. The analysis above agree with the Gender Strategy Advancement International (GSAI) that noncompliance with the 35% Affirmative Action by political parties and Electoral body (INEC) has resulted to low level of women representation in politics and democratic governance between 2019-2023 in Nigeria. On the factor militating against the implementation of the 35% Affirmative



Action for women representation in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria, the study revealed that there were several challenges affecting the effective implementation of the 35% Affirmative Action. This finding is supported by the findings from Burns (2001) empirical studies that low level of education among women is an impediment to active participation and representation of women in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Another major impediment to the implementation of the 35% National Gender Policy for Affirmative Action according to (Nwoye, 2007), is political violence. During campaigns, the political atmosphere in Nigeria is highly characterized by assassinations, murders, arson, looting and kidnapping. Based on this, female aspirants of various political parties, may not be able to withstand the challenges of the nature of political violence in Nigeria. The women who were unsuccessful in their run for office spoke of intimidation and coercion by party leaders and godfathers – defined as wealthy men who ‘use their influence to block the participation of others in Nigerian politics’ (Albert, 2005). The nature of Party structure, negative perception towards female politicians and the above mentioned were the major impediments to the effective implementation of the National Gender Policy of 35% Affirmative Action for women representation in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria between 2019-2023.

In agreement with free and compulsory female education, Burns (2005) said that, education is one of the critical influences that shape the political awareness and involvement. Education can also be seen as one of the most powerful instruments in developing and mastering our social and natural environment, also to compete for political survival with men. According to Harrison and Mayer (1971). Gender quotas requires that women must constitute a certain number of percentages of the members of a body, whether it is a candidate lists, a parliamentary assembly or a government (Dahlerup, 2005). The quota law in Nigeria provided for at most 60% and at least 30% representation of either sex, which was introduced as a result of Beijing conference. At the conference, it was agreed that 30% of public seat and position should be reserved for women. They are generally seen as a positive action of laws allocating quotas for women to assist in the promotion for gender balance in public life. The findings also agreed with Ogunba (2000) that, the society need to be enlightened mostly the men, spouses of women in politics need more understanding and encouragement to seek for elective and appointive posts without the fear of losing their homes or being seen in a negative way. Women should be given equal right with men in the country with regards to implementation of all aspects of the constitution. Some aspect of the constitution should spell out special protection for the right of women in this country. Constitutional provisions dealing with citizenship, and rights of residence is still discriminatory against women.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The paper concludes that legalization of the 35% Affirmative Action is enough to change the negative perception against female politicians and will also motivate them to aspire and contest for elective political positions in the state. Most of the female respondents based on the findings, does not believe that women are capable to lead, they see themselves as unfit and undeserving for political leadership positions of their state because of this cultural myth. For women to be encouraged to participate in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria, challenges such as cultural and religious beliefs, illiteracy, negative perception against female politicians, poverty, etc, needed to be addressed before women can actualize their dreams of becoming leaders like their male counterparts. Thus, the paper recommend that in any democratic society such as Nigeria progressive, gender equality in political participation and

governance is of great importance. In the course of the study, some of the findings showed that women still do not have equal rights as men when it comes to politics.

There is need for legislation on gender quota system. With constitutional backing, the achievement of the National Policy of 35% Affirmative Action will continue to be an illusion. Political parties should be ready and willing to examine their party structure to remove various barriers that discriminate against the involvement of women in partisan politics and democratic governance. They should also develop strategies that allow women to actively participate in decision-making and policy making processes of the state and the country at large. The government should also help women to balance work with domestic obligations through the provision of benefits such as maternity leave, child care, access to loan with low or no interest rate, removal of cultural biases against women, etc. Also, at the individual level, women should be ready to help each other by serving as role models, enlightenment programmes against inferiority and lack of self-esteem.

Institutional body should be established to ensure compliance with the 35% Affirmative Action, so as to supervise the application of gender quota system and sanction should be imposed for non-compliance. Also, for National Gender Policy of 35% Affirmative Action for women representation in politics and democratic governance to be achieved in Nigeria, there is need to build the capability and capacity of young secondary school girls to prepare them for future leadership and political positions. Awareness should be created for women's involvement in political leadership and their contributions to the society should be recognized. Leadership training and Empowerment programs for women should be encouraged. Leadership club for girls in secondary and tertiary institutions should be established to help prepare more girls for elective and appointive positions.

As an important agent of socialization, the school should help to engage the teachers to change the status quo of gender bias against women and to advocate for girls' leadership development in operation catch them young. Both genders should be treated equally and it should be known that education of women should not end in the kitchen, but should be encouraged that they can be better leaders when given the opportunity. Aside domestic roles, women play significant roles, they are highly responsive to constitute concerns and securing lasting peace in the society when given a chance to participate in politics. Government should be ready to take measures and reform in the electoral system, so as to encourage political parties to integrate women in both elective and appointive positions in the same proportion as men. Women should be empowered by the government, both local and international governmental organizations, private sectors and civil societies to actively participate in governance at all levels. When this happens, it will build their confidence and experience in partisan politics. Women who are fortunate to be in any leadership position should work hard to show that women can also do greatly in politics, even better than their male counterparts and make a difference in their societies. For this to happen, women should be ready to encourage and support fellow women who have the interest to join/ form political parties or to vie for any elective positions.

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