

LOCKED OUT BEFORE THE BALLOT:

Disability, Internal Party Democracy, and Political Exclusion
in Nigeria



JOINT NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
(JONAPWD)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

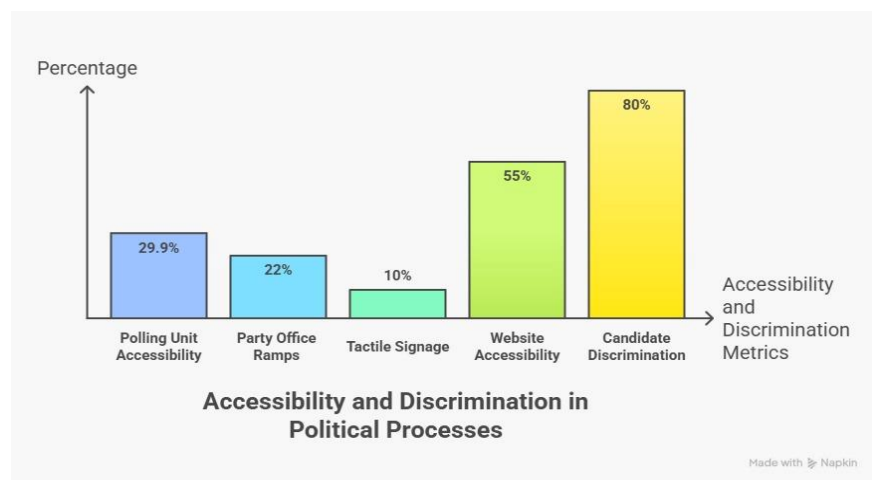
Political parties are the primary gatekeepers of democratic participation in Nigeria. While the **1999 Constitution and the Electoral Act 2022** affirm the right of all citizens to participate in public life, access to candidacy is largely determined within party structures long before general elections take place.

For persons with disabilities, these internal processes often present decisive barriers. Recent audits reveal that fewer than 30% of polling units are persons with disabilities-friendly and only **22%** of political party offices have basic accessibility and assistive features like ramps (WFD, 2023; Ahmadu, 2025).

This policy brief harmonises legal analysis with primary data to argue that relying on discretionary "welfare" gestures has failed. It identifies five structural barriers from unenforceable constitutions to prohibitive nomination fees and recommends that the Inter-Party Advisory Council (IPAC) coordinate the adoption of Minimum Internal Democracy Standards to transform parties from gatekeepers into gateways for inclusive leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is recognizing diversity and intersectionality across all human platforms. Discussions on disability inclusive electoral participation often focus on Election Day logistics and general involvement of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. However, the most decisive exclusion occurs



much earlier. Political parties constitute the entry point to leadership; when their internal systems are inaccessible, the promise of the **Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018** is nullified.

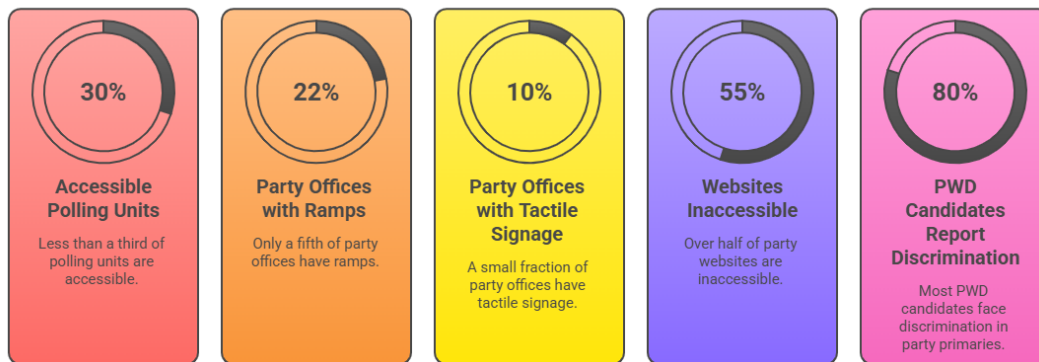
Despite strong legal protections, implementation within party structures remains weak. Systemic gaps in internal party democracy mean that persons with disabilities are often viewed as voting capital to be mobilized, rather than political capital to be groomed for leadership.

KEY STATISTICS: The Scale of Exclusion

- **<30%** of polling units are accessible to Persons with disabilities.

- **22%** of party offices have ramps; only **10%** have tactile signage.
- **55%** of political party websites are inaccessible to visually impaired users (WFD, 2023).
- **80%** of Persons with disabilities candidates report facing discrimination during party primaries (Ahmadu, 2025).

Persons with Disabilities Accessibility and Discrimination in Nigerian Politics



Legal protections for persons with disabilities in Nigerian politics are insufficient due to weak implementation within party structures.

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Although the Constitution of Nigeria (1999), Electoral Act (2022), and Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) provide strong legal protections, implementation in party structures remains weak. This systemic gap undermines participation and reduces democratic legitimacy.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND ANALYSIS

Persons with disabilities exclusion from party politics is structural, driven by five interlinked barriers:

1. Limited Operationalization of Inclusion in Party Constitutions

While most political parties articulate broad commitments to equality, their constitutions rarely translate these into enforceable provisions. Inclusion often depends on the discretion of leadership rather than the rule of law (Selected Party Constitutions, 2022-2023).

Table 1: Comparative Party Constitution Analysis

Political Party	Disability Inclusion Language	Operationalized?	Notes / Excerpts
APC	General reference	Limited	Lacks enforceable disability measures
APGA	No	No	Broad inclusion statements without rules

LP	No	No	Focus on youth/women; disability not operationalized
NNPP	No	No	Equality preamble only
PDP	No	No	Equality stated; no enforcement clauses

(Source: INEC Repository, 2024)

2. Nomination Fees as a Structural Barrier

The "Cost of Politics" has risen beyond the reach of the average citizen (Yiaga Africa, 2022). This disproportionately excludes persons with disabilities, who face systemic economic marginalisation.

- **The Gap:** Fee waivers are often discretionary and inconsistent. Crucially, they typically cover only the "Nomination Form" while ignoring expensive "Administrative Fees" and "Expression of Interest" levies, leaving the financial barrier effectively intact.

3. Physically Inaccessible Primary Election Processes

Internal democracy requires presence. However, primaries are frequently held in venues that violate the accessibility mandates of the Disability Act (2018). A WFD study confirmed that most party buildings sampled were effectively "no-go areas," characterised by steep staircases, no ramps, and narrow doors unable to accommodate wheelchairs.

- **The Gap:** Exclusion extends beyond the secretariat to the campaign trail. Respondents noted that while polling

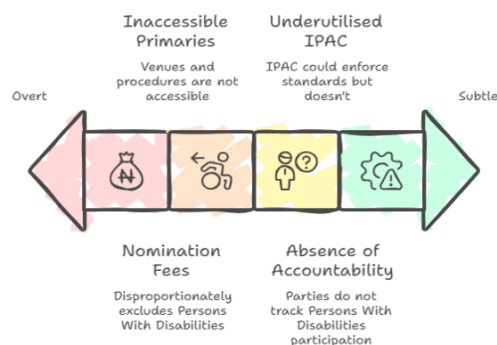
VOICES FROM THE FIELD – THE "WINNABILITY" MYTH -
While fees and stairs are physical barriers, the psychological barrier of bias is equally effective at silencing persons with disabilities aspirations.

The Coercion of Candidates: One respondent revealed how internal party politics actively weeds out persons with disabilities: "After indicating interest to participate... I was coerced to step down for another party member. I was told the 'able-bodied' member had a better chance of taking the party to power."

The Credibility Gap: Another respondent noted that in Nigerian party politics, "People see disability and gender before the credibility and capacity of the candidate."

This confirms that exclusion is often an active choice by party leadership, driven by an unfounded bias that persons with disabilities candidates cannot win elections.

Party barriers to disability inclusion range from overt to subtle.



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units might be manageable, "campaign venues were not wheelchair-accessible," preventing persons with disabilities aspirants from canvassing for votes or meeting delegates. When a primary or campaign event is held in such a venue, aspirants with disabilities are physically "locked out" of the room where consensus candidates are chosen.

4. Absence of Internal Accountability Mechanisms

Political parties generally do not track the participation of persons with disabilities within their structures.

- **Evidence:** This "data silence" was confirmed in a recent JONAPWD stakeholder consultation (2025), where the section regarding engagement with political parties received **zero responses**. Without data, exclusion remains invisible and unchallenged.

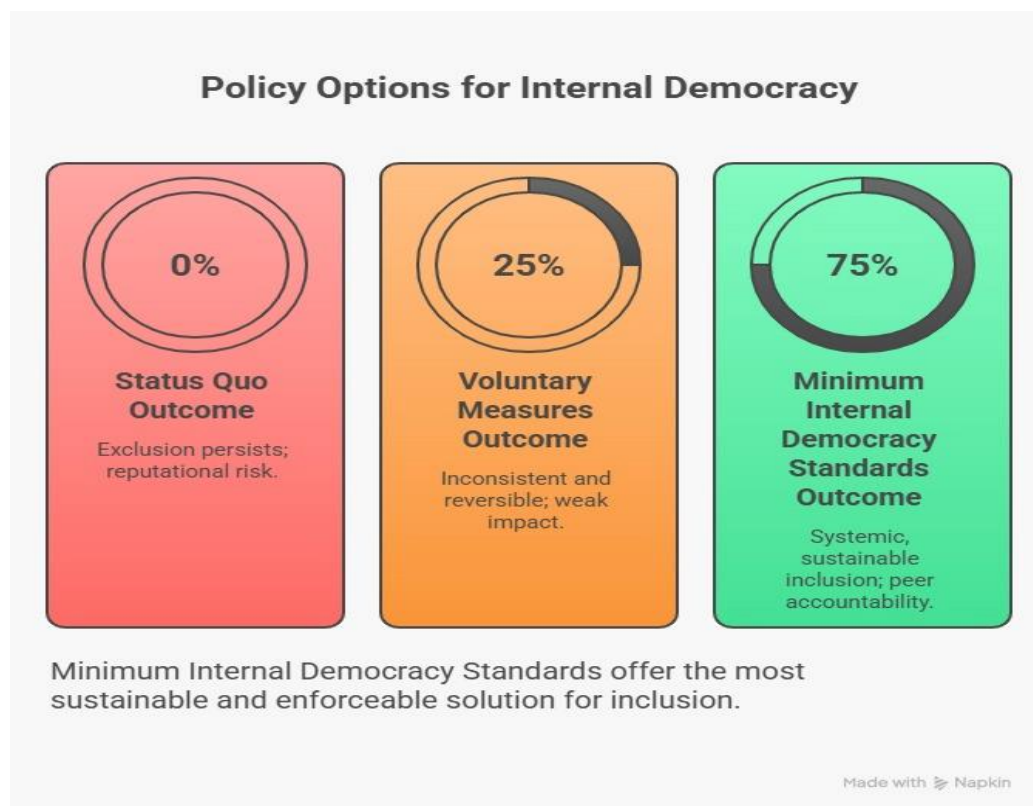
5. Untapped Coordinating Role of IPAC

While the IPAC Code of Conduct (2019) sets ethical standards, disability inclusion is yet to be systematically integrated into its peer review mechanisms. This limits opportunities for coordinated improvement across the political spectrum.

POLICY OPTIONS

Stakeholders face three distinct choices for addressing these gaps:

Option	Description	Outcome
1. Status Quo	Maintain verbal commitments only.	High Risk: Exclusion persists; reputational damage increases.
2. Voluntary Measures	Ad hoc waivers and discretionary guidelines.	Weak Impact: Progress is inconsistent and reversible by new leadership.
3. Minimum Standards (Recommended)	IPAC-coordinated enforceable baseline for constitutions, fees, and access.	High Impact: Creates systemic, sustainable inclusion and peer accountability.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving from Voluntary Waivers to Minimum Standards

To Political Parties:

- **Constitutional Review:** Review guidelines to align with **Section 54 of the Electoral Act 2022**, ensuring clear provisions for inclusion in leadership selection.
- **Transparent Waivers:** Codify fee waivers to mitigate the financial exclusion identified by *Yiaga Africa (2022)*, ensuring they cover all mandatory fees.
- **Accessible Venues:** Ensure venues comply with the accessibility standards of the *Disability Act (2018)*, invalidating primaries held in inaccessible locations.
- **Designate Focal Points:** Appoint internal officers responsible for monitoring disability inclusion within party structures.

To The Inter-Party Advisory Council (IPAC):

- **Set the Standard:** Integrate disability inclusion indicators into the IPAC Code of Conduct.
- **Promote Accountability:** Facilitate an annual "Inclusion Scorecard" to rate parties on their compliance, creating reputational incentives for reform.

- **Lead Collective Reform:** Convene party leadership to sign a shared "**Charter of Inclusion**" committing to these Minimum Internal Democracy Standards.

CONCLUSION: From Gatekeepers to Gate-openers. The question is not whether political parties can make these changes, but whether they choose to. A party that excludes persons with disabilities is narrowing its own talent pool and disconnecting from a significant segment of the electorate. By adopting Minimum Internal Democracy Standards, Nigeria's political parties can move beyond symbolic gestures toward durable inclusion.

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