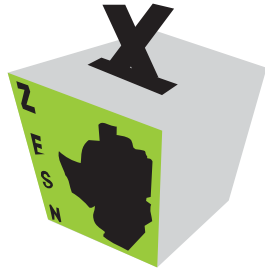


VOTER APATHY

RESEARCH REPORT



**Zimbabwe Election
Support Network**
Promoting Democratic
Elections In Zimbabwe



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Support Network** ■

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Elections In Zimbabwe

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1. Introduction

Voter apathy, or the lack of interest and participation in elections, has been a growing concern in Zimbabwe over the past two decades. While Zimbabwe has held regular elections since independence in 1980, public trust in the electoral process has weakened due to political tensions, disputed election results, limited civic education, and a lack of meaningful youth engagement. Over time, many citizens, particularly young people, have become disengaged from voting. For instance, Project Vote 263 commenting on the 2018 harmonised elections observed that *“Zimbabwe had approximately 4.1 million youth between the ages of 18 to 35 who were eligible to register to vote but only 2 501 000 (61%) were registered to vote and only 38% were able to cast their votes on election day; approximately 1 520 000. This means 2 580 000 million young people did not vote in 2018 and 1 599 000 were not registered to vote”*. There is a perception amongst the youth that their votes do not lead to real change, hence the disengagement with elections by young people.

Past elections in Zimbabwe have experienced low voter turnouts. The general voter turnout average for Zimbabwe's elections is 52.33% (IFES, 2025). The low voter turnout has been mostly experienced in urban areas and among first-time voters. This trend highlights a lack of interest along with deeper structural and social challenges, such as limited access to national identity documents, restrictive cultural norms, political intimidation, and inadequate access to voter education. These issues hinder citizens' ability and willingness to register and vote.

The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) has a long history of promoting democratic participation, electoral transparency, and civic engagement. As part of its work, ZESN has observed voter turnout patterns and noted an increase in voter apathy in recent years. In response, this study was conducted to better understand the root causes of voter apathy in Zimbabwe. It focuses on gathering voices and experiences from different communities and stakeholders to inform targeted strategies for improving voter participation and ensuring that all citizens, regardless of background, can engage meaningfully in the country's democratic processes.

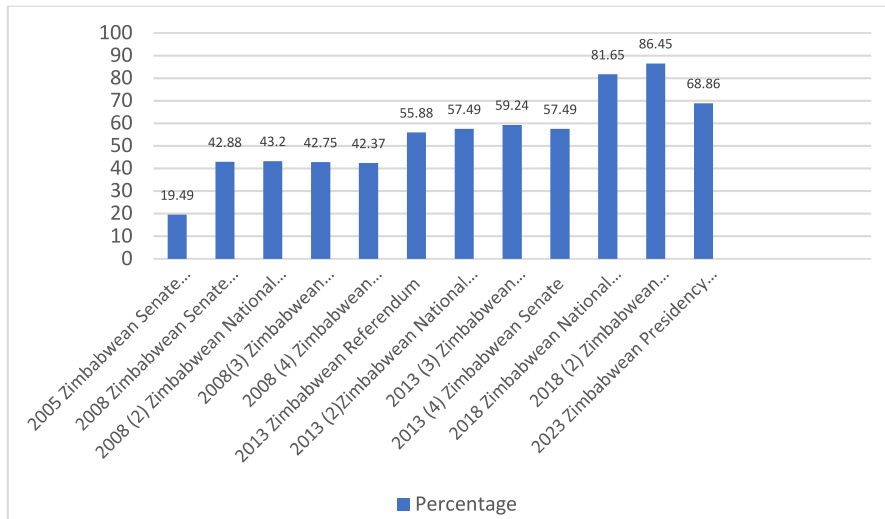
The study employed various research methods to explore this issue, including reviewing past reports and documents, conducting Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in different communities, and speaking with key individuals in those communities. FGDs occurred in person in areas such as Bulawayo, Mutare, Chimanmani, and Marondera, while virtual meetings were utilised to engage participants from other regions like Harare, Midlands, Masvingo, Matabeleland, and Mashonaland provinces.

1.1. Background: Zimbabwe's Electoral Context

Voter Turn Out Trends

Zimbabwe's voter turnout from the year 2000 has just been generally slightly above average. According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES,) Zimbabwe's average voter turnout over the years has been hovering around 52.33% which is slightly above half by a mere 2.33 percentage points (IFES, 2025). Figure 1 points to a voter turnout that has been generally low with the exception of the 2018 elections where voter turnout remarkably went up to 86.45% and declined in the 2023 to 68.86% in the presidential elections. This upsurge may be explained by the electoral reforms undertaken by Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), albeit piecemeal, they probably improved the landscape for participation. Most notably was the biometric voter registration and relaxation of the proof of residence requirement which may have increased citizens' confidence in the process, hence the increased zeal to vote. In addition, the 2018 elections saw the upsurge of first-time voters, which may have been possibly due to the fact of new candidates after the demise of Morgan Tsvangirayi and removal of President Mugabe through Operation Restore Legacy

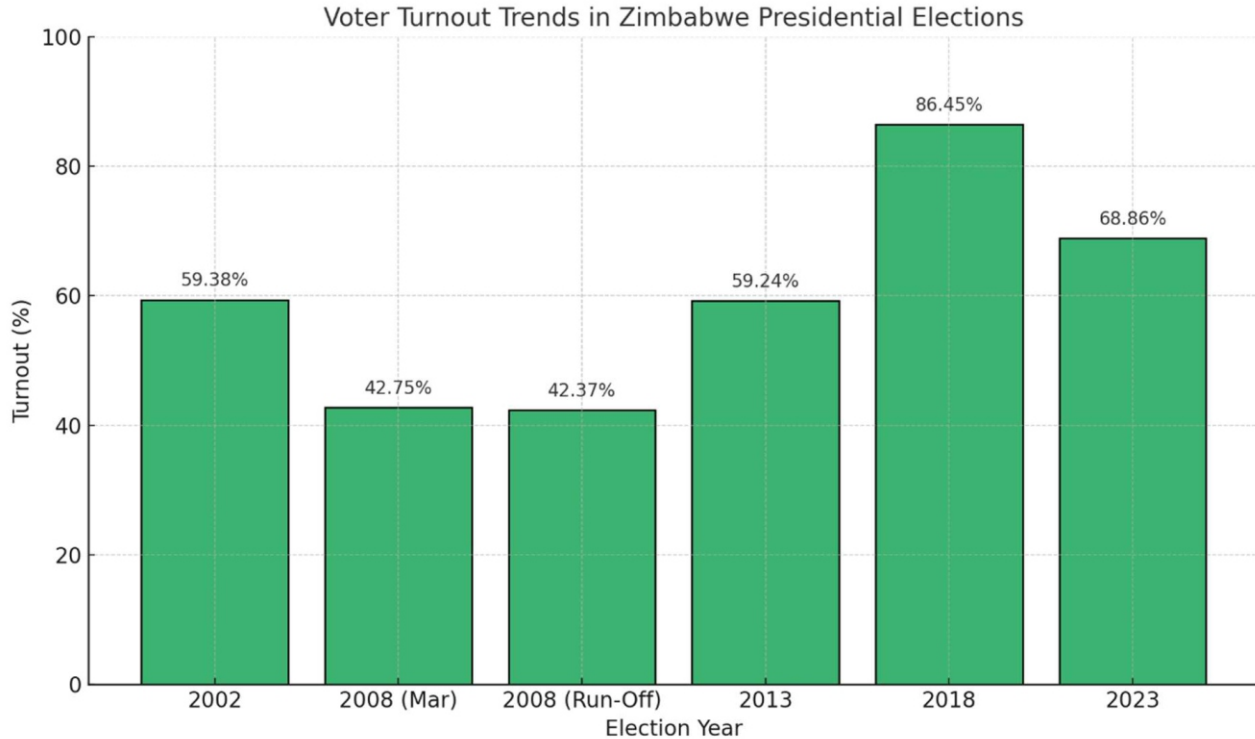
Figure 1: Voter Turnout 2005-2023.



Source IFES (2025): <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/240/>

A peek into the voter turnout trends point to declining numbers as shown in Figure, with the exception of the year 2018. The upsurge in the 2018 voter turnout numbers is attributable to the same factors alluded to in explaining the numbers in Figure 1.

Figure 2: Voter Turn Out in Presidential Elections



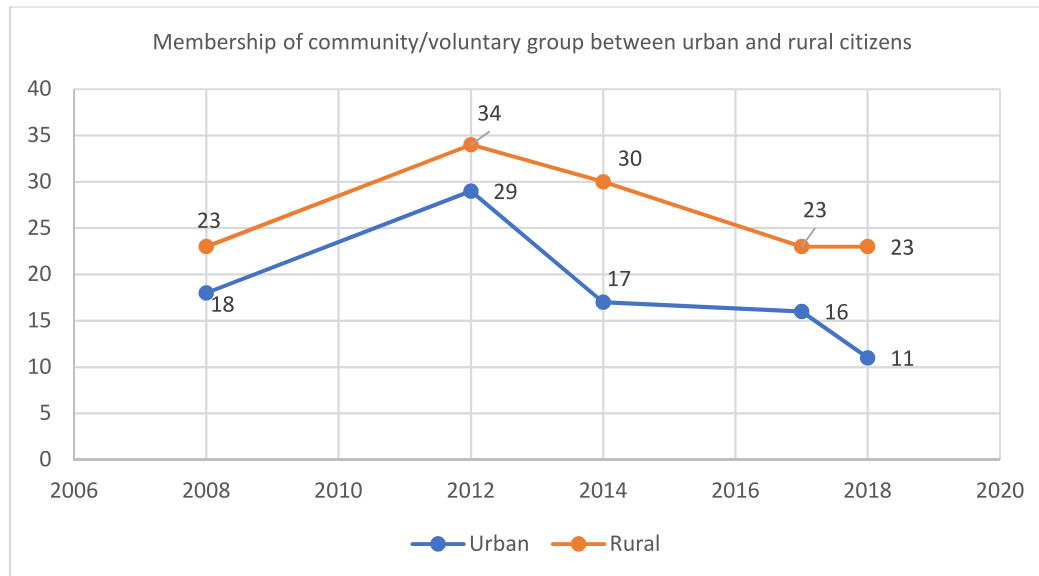
Generally, one may conclude that post 2000 voter turnout statistics in Zimbabwe point to a citizenry that is not actively engaged with elections. Additionally, by-elections have historically been characterised by low voter turnout. Despite Section 67 of the Zimbabwean Constitution guaranteeing every Zimbabwean the right to vote, the actual participation in exercising this constitutional right remains limited, particularly by-elections. In February 2024, a by-election conducted in six constituencies reflected low voter turnout. Mkoba North saw a turnout of 14.02%,

Pelandaba-Tshabalala recorded 11.73% and in Goromonzi South 18.1% casted their ballots. Chegutu West recorded 33.5%, Zvimba East 31.6% and Seke 30.18%.

1.2 Trends in civic and political processes in Zimbabwe

A reading of literature on civic and political processes in Zimbabwe indicates an active citizenry during the first two decades of independence, with civil society rising to prominence in the decade from 1990, led by the largely urban-based labour movement that sought to counter the debilitating effects of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) (Raftopoulos, 2018). This marked the golden era of civil society and active citizenship in Zimbabwe. However, over time, especially from the year 2000 onward, there has been a noticeable decline in active citizenship, as Zimbabweans began to emigrate largely for political and economic reasons. By 2008, the extent of associational life (the participation of citizens in voluntary associations or community groups) among citizens showed a worryingly low score and a declining tendency over the years, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

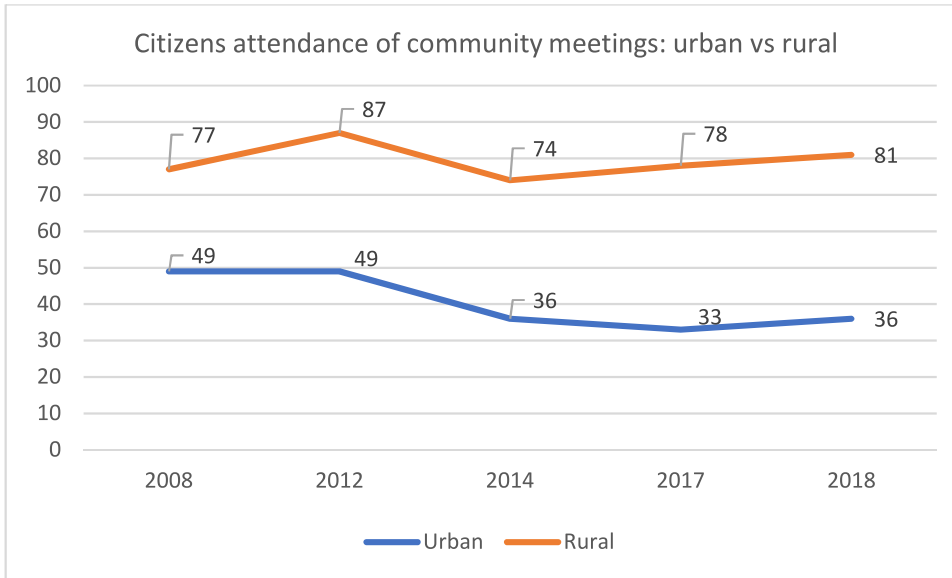
Figure 3: Declining membership of community organisations/voluntary groups



Source: Afrobarometer round of surveys from 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2018)

Membership in community organisations or other voluntary groups is actually higher in rural areas compared to urban ones. The above figure suggests that rural citizens are more engaged in civic initiatives and have performed better in terms of organising and participation. Relatedly, a computation of Afrobarometer data on citizens' attendance at community meetings indicates higher participation rates in rural areas compared to urban areas.

Figure 4: Citizens' attendance of community meetings



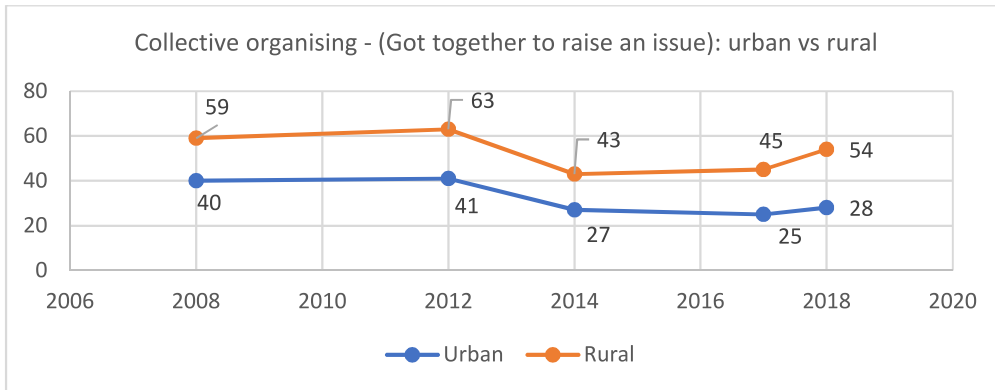
Source: Afrobarometer round of surveys from 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2018)

Citizens' attendance at community meetings reveals a clear urban/rural divide, with rural citizens exhibiting greater participation compared to their urban counterparts. Attendance in urban areas has steadily declined from a peak (which was still low) of 49% between 2008 and 2012 to a low of just 36% in 2018. The disparity in participation is stark when contrasting attendance in rural areas, which has remained above 74% since 2014 (still higher than at any time in urban areas during the same period). However, it should be noted that community participation in rural areas is directly tied to livelihood-supporting initiatives such as government input support schemes and various relief interventions. This introduces further complexities to the forms of participation available to citizens across regions. Regardless of the differing political economy considerations between urban and rural areas, it is evident that rural citizens have better attendance rates at community

meetings, which, in turn, presents opportunities for promoting civic and political engagement but also highlights the need to intensify civic programming in urban areas.

Furthermore, rural inhabitants have shown a higher tendency for collective organising compared to urbanites. Figure 5 indicates that the urban/rural differentiation is evident, as rural organising has consistently outpaced urban organising. Despite a slight increase between 2008 and 2012 (from 59% to 63%), this type of organising in rural areas dipped significantly to 43% in 2014. However, a slight increase is notable up to 2018, where 54% of citizens participated in such collective action. Between 2008 and 2012, participation in urban areas increased by only one percentage point (from 40% to 41%), and it experienced a similar sharp decline as seen in rural areas, dropping to a low of 25% in 2018, followed by a slight rise to 28% by the same year.

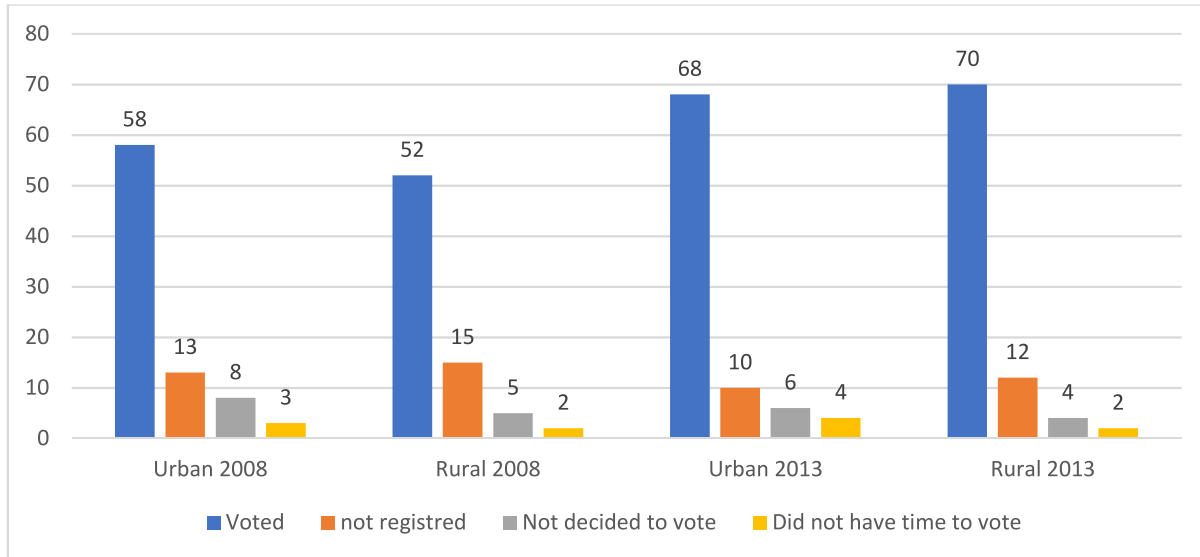
Figure 5: Collective organising among citizens' (Urban vs. Rural).



Source: Afrobarometer round of surveys from 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2018

In as much as the relationship between democracy and elections requires one to analyse the trend of citizens' participation as voters in other democratic processes, turnout in elections play a significant role in understanding voter apathy. Figure 4 below depicts consistently high voter turnout in rural areas. Interestingly, urban areas witnessed a marked increase in voter turnout in the 2008 elections to 59%, which was probably linked to the emergence of an opposition-controlled parliament since the year 2000 and the ruling party's loss in the first round of the presidential elections in 2008. Conversely, rural areas experienced a slight surge in voter turnout during the same elections, increasing from 69% in 2008 to 71% in the 2013 elections. It is evident that the low levels of non-electoral civic participation observed in urban areas seem to translate to low levels of electoral participation.

Figure 6: Participation in the 2008 and 2013 elections



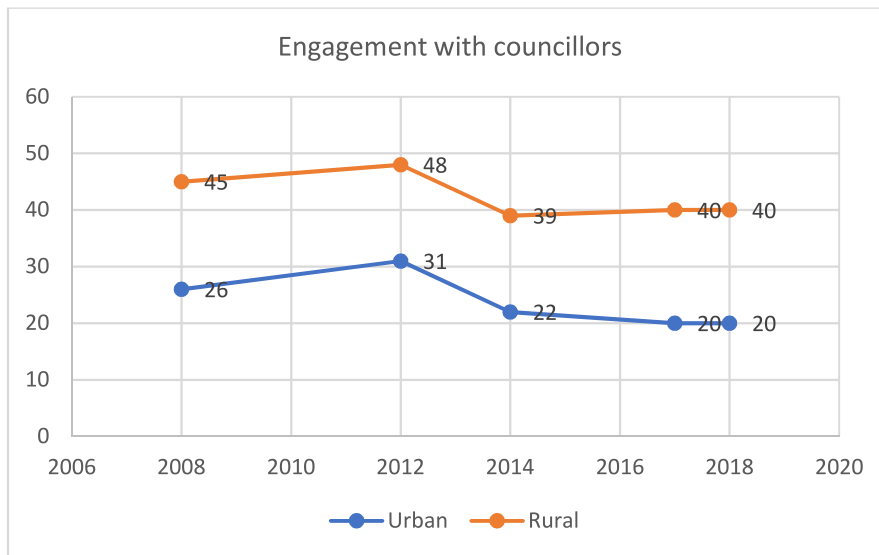
Source: Afrobarometer round of surveys 2012 and 2014)

From the information in Figure 6, it can also be discerned that the number of eligible but unregistered voters is higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. Almost twice as many eligible urban citizens were not registered to vote as compared to their rural counterparts. Thus, apart from more urban residents not turning out to vote, a greater number of those eligible are not registered and therefore miss the opportunity to do so. Another key insight from the same data is that a higher number of urban citizens who are registered to vote actually choose not to participate on polling day. As shown in the Figure 6 above, 6% of registered urban voters decided not to vote on polling day in 2008, and this percentage rose to 9% in the 2013 elections. This seems to correspond with the growing apathy in urban areas already noted. On the other hand, the percentage of registered rural voters who chose not to vote remained at 4% for both the 2008 and 2013 elections, a figure lower than the urban count for both elections. Observations on youth, who form the majority of voters in Zimbabwe, indicate similar patterns of apathy. Bratton and Masunungure (2018:7) observe that, “*First, about one in six members of the youngest cohort in urban areas report that they have no intention of registering to vote, which points to a troubling degree of alienation from politics among some youthful elements in Zimbabwe’s cities and towns.*” In addition, the rural/urban distinction continues, with youth in rural areas participating

more in voter registration compared to their urban counterparts. For instance, it is noted that, "Second, voter registration among the second-youngest age bracket (26-35) is somewhat higher in rural than urban areas (87% vs. 82%)" (Bratton and Masunungure, 2018).

Moreover, a worrying trend in civic organising and participation relates to the low levels of engagement by citizens with elected public officials, including the local councillor and Member of Parliament (MP), as well as officials from government agencies. However, it is this engagement with local leaders that should form the basis for deepening democratic participation and making it more substantive. Most importantly, all three graphs (4, 5 and 6) on engagement with public officials, representing elected local leaders and government agency officials, consistently show higher engagement in rural areas compared to urban areas. Nevertheless, for all three public officials, engagement has remained below 50%. This highlights a disengaged citizenry and signals a critical need for civic programming that encourages active citizenship beyond just voting. More importantly, it underscores the distinction between 'mere voters' and 'active citizens'.

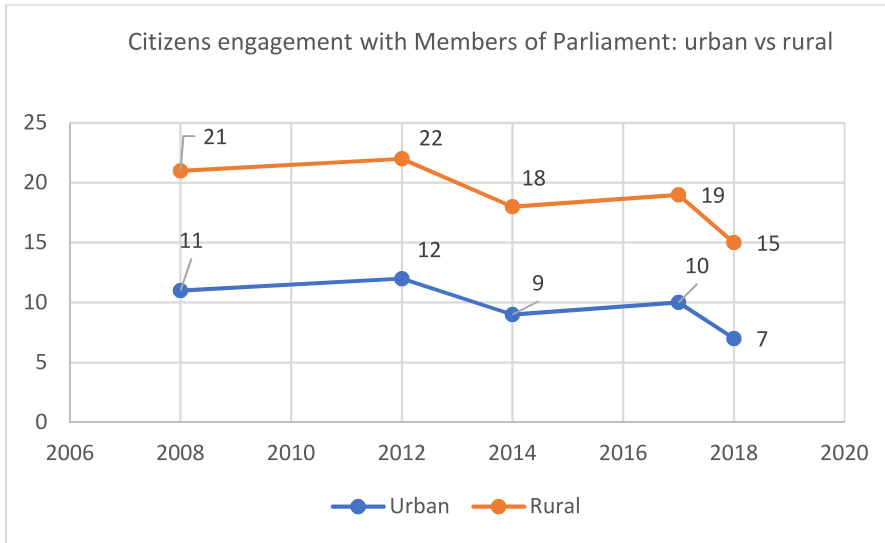
Figure 7: Citizens' engagement with local councillor



Source: Afrobarometer round of surveys from 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2018)

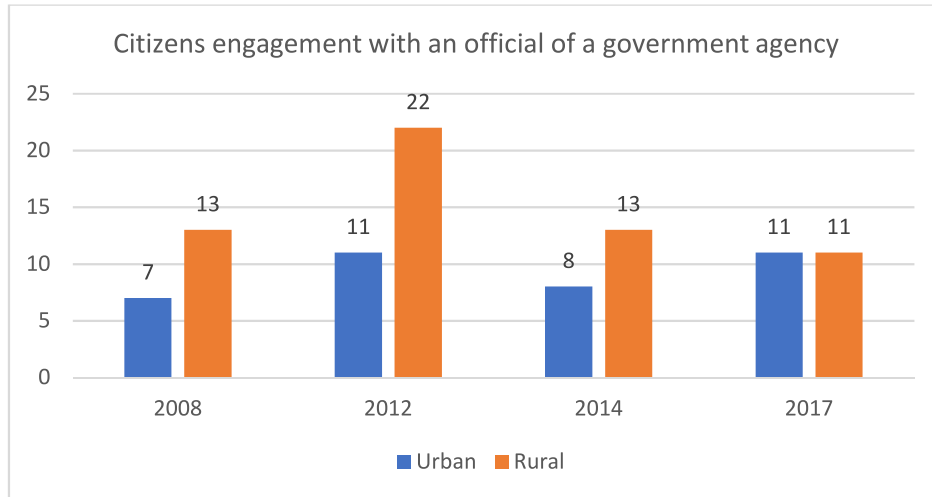
Engagement with local elected public leaders is higher for local councillors compared to local MPs. In essence, citizens are more likely to engage with their local councillor than with their MP. They are also least likely to engage with an official of a government agency compared to either their local councillor or MP.

Figure 8: Citizens' engagement with local Member of Parliament



Source: Afrobarometer round of surveys from 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2018)

Generally, between 2008 and 2018, engagement with all three public officials has declined, except for a slight surge between 2008 and 2012. For engagement with rural local councillors (see Figure 5), it stood at 45% in 2008 and dropped to 40% by 2018. Regarding the rural local MP (see Figure 6), engagement was 21% in 2008, peaked at 22% in 2012, and fell to 15% by 2018. Additionally, Figure 8 illustrates that rural citizens' engagement with a government agency official was 13% in 2008, peaked at 22% in 2012, and receded to only 11% by 2018.

Figure 9: Citizens' engagement with official of a government agency

Source: Afrobarometer round of surveys from 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017

Explaining these disparities may draw on various angles, but most notably, it may highlight how the reconfigured political economy has impacted urban and rural areas differently. In urban areas, this reconfigured political economy, along with its elevation to dominance in the informal economy, has significantly affected labour-based platforms for organising, which have historically served as a key avenue for citizens' participation. This has resulted in the atomisation of society (Masunungure, 2014). In rural areas, this situation has tended to reinforce the dominance of agrarian-based livelihoods, which have consistently emphasised a communitarian or collective approach to life in general and specifically to social reproduction.

In addition to the reconfigured political economy, a confluence of other factors, such as loss of faith in democracy and elections, low trust in the electoral management body (read ZEC), loss of confidence in local leaders, and violence and intimidation, among many others, are contributing to apathetic behaviour by citizens. Literature highlights the challenges of a fledgling democracy as citizens become disillusioned with it. Chikwanha-Dzenga (2004) observes that, *"On the political front, Zimbabweans are losing faith in democracy and an increasing number acquiesce to the idea of single-party rule"*. This is further compounded by the fact that elections have consistently failed to bring the much-desired change for citizens. M'Çormack-Hale and Dome (2021) observe that, *"Only four in 10 Africans (42 per cent) say that elections in their country are effective in ensuring that representatives to parliament reflect the views of voters. The same proportion think*

elections enable voters to remove leaders who don't do what the people want". Repeatedly, M'Çormack-Hale and Dome (2022) made same observations, "Drawing on 2019/2021 Afrobarometer data from 34 African countries, we find that while most Africans believe in elections as the best way to select their leaders, popular support for elections has weakened. Only a minority think elections help produce representative, accountable leadership". These observations are reinforced by Akinochi (2024), who observes that "...fewer than half think voting ensures representative, accountable governance". Essentially, there is a loss of faith in the efficacy of elections, an observation that reverberated strongly in the stakeholder consultations. This loss of faith in democracy and elections has led young people in Africa to become more inclined to support autocratic institutions due to concerns about democracy. Afrobarometer (2024) observes that, "The findings, based on 53,444 face-to-face interviews, show that while Africa's youth (aged 18-35) differ little from their elders in their support for democracy, they express a greater willingness to tolerate military intervention 'when elected leaders abuse power for their own ends.' They are also less trustful of government institutions and leaders and more likely to view them as corrupt". Therefore, Moyo-Nyede and Mpako (2022) observe that, "Though dominant in numbers, Zimbabwe's youth are less likely than their elders to participate in change-making activities such as voting and civic activities".

On the African continent, democracy has been the most preferred form of rule among citizens (Afrobarometer, 2024); however, there is a significant lack of trust in electoral management bodies. Akinochi (2024) observes that, *"And public trust in national electoral management bodies is weak in most countries."* Also, according to Afrobarometer (2024:6), *"47% of the respondents indicated not having trust in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission."* Key in the minds of citizens has been the belief that elections are always manipulated. For instance, Afrobarometer (2018) observes, *"Zimbabweans remained apprehensive about the possibility of electoral manipulation: As was the case in May 2018, significant minorities were worried about ballot secrecy, counting of votes, announcement of incorrect results, post-election violence, and the military not accepting election results."* Pursuant to this, voters believed that either their vote would not count or that the correct result would not be announced. This aligns with Bratton and Masunungure's (2018) observation that *"29% of surveyed respondents believe that your vote will not be counted while 44% claimed an incorrect vote will be announced."*

The low levels of trust in public officials, disoriented citizens and contributed to their disengagement with civic and political processes. For instance, councillors are perceived as aloof to the citizenry who elected them *"But only a minority believe that local government councillors actually listen to them, even though most are confident that they could get together with others to*

make their concerns heard" (Ndoma, 2023). Nyede-Moyo and Mpako (2022) also make similar observations: *"Fewer than half of the youth demographic approve of the way the president, members of Parliament, and local government councillors have performed their jobs"* (Moyo-Nyede and Mpako, 2022). In addition, violence, intimidation and fear have played a central role in Zimbabwe's electoral environment (Kriger, 2003). Therefore, violence, intimidation and fear continue to be significant factors in Zimbabwe's elections. Ndoma and Kokera observe that, *"Afrobarometer Round 7 survey findings in Zimbabwe show overwhelming popular desire for regular, open, and honest elections, but this is accompanied by widespread fears of political intimidation and violence during campaigns as well as a strong perception that citizens need to exercise caution when casting their ballots"* (Ndoma and Kokera, 2017). Regarding the 2018 elections, Afrobarometer (2018) observes, *"Fear of electoral violence declined slightly but remained high: The proportion of Zimbabweans who fear becoming a victim of electoral violence dropped by 8 percentage points since May 2018 but is still above average among African countries"*. This has somehow led to self-censorship by citizens and failure to enjoy their freedoms. Afrobarometer (2018) notes, *"The proportion of respondents who think that people must be careful of what they say about politics dipped by 6 percentage points between May (82%) and July (76%). But a tendency to self-censorship remained strong (e.g. higher than a 24-country average of 70%)"*. Ultimately, citizens tend to shy away from civic and political processes as a self-preservation tactic. This is further compounded by the fact that a significant section of Zimbabweans believes that the security sector, a historical Achilles' heel to elections and governance in Zimbabwe, would not accept the results. This resonates with Bratton and Masunungure (2018) observation that *"41% of surveyed respondents believe that the security actors won't accept election results and that 40% believe there will be violence after the announcement of election results"*.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Approach and Data Collection

The Voter Apathy Report employed a qualitative research design to explore the drivers and manifestations of voter apathy in Zimbabwe. Three qualitative data collection methods were utilised: a desktop review, FGDs, and Key Informant Interviews (KIs). The study began with a comprehensive, systematic review of existing literature to gather factual and empirical data that supplemented and contextualised the primary data. Secondary sources included online resources, reports from the ZESN, civil society reports, regional and international observer mission reports, United Nations publications, ZEC documents, academic journals, books, and

other documentary archives. Insights from the desk review also informed the design of research instruments and thematic areas for primary data collection.

Primary data collection involved purposively sampled FGDs and KIs across the five clustered regions of Mashonaland, Matabeleland, Manicaland, Midlands, and Masvingo. In total, the study conducted three physical FGDs in Bulawayo, including one with persons with disabilities (PWDs) and one with women, along with eight KIs. In Manicaland, three physical FGDs were conducted, complemented by four physical KIs: one with a teacher, another with a member of the Apostolic sect, and two youth leaders. Additionally, two FGDs were held in Mutare - one with mixed youth and another with Persons with Disabilities, while a mixed-gender youth FGD took place in Nyanyadzi Growth Point in Chimanimani District. In Mashonaland East, one physical FGD with PWDs was conducted in Marondera town, along with one KI.

Additionally, five virtual FGDs were convened with participants from different provincial clusters: Bulawayo; Harare and Mashonaland East; Matabeleland North and South; Mashonaland East, Central, and Manicaland; and Midlands and Masvingo. Virtual sessions were adopted to enhance accessibility and coverage, especially in areas where political tensions constrained physical consultations.

2.2. Research Limitations

Notably, some planned physical consultations could not be conducted due to the prevailing political environment during data collection, which coincided with the “Geza” movement marked by protests, planned demonstrations, and stay-aways that were planned for 31 March and 22 and 23 April 2025. This situation raised security concerns and limited community access, affecting locations such as Kwekwe Central in Midlands and Sadza in Mashonaland East. Consequently, virtual engagements provided a safer and more practical alternative to ensure stakeholder participation without compromising the study's integrity. The research budget limited the geographic cover of the data collection. To efficiently allocate the resources and ensure geographic equity taking cognisance of the linguistic and cultural diversity, we clustered the 10 provinces into three: Mashonaland Provinces, Matabeleland Provinces and Masvingo/Mutare/Midlands Provinces. This allowed us to have fairly representative sample. Therefore, the findings of this report are statistically generalisable, they offer deep insights and nuances on voter apathy issues within the country. This multi-method qualitative approach allowed for the triangulation of data sources, fostering a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of voter apathy in Zimbabwe.

3. Study Findings

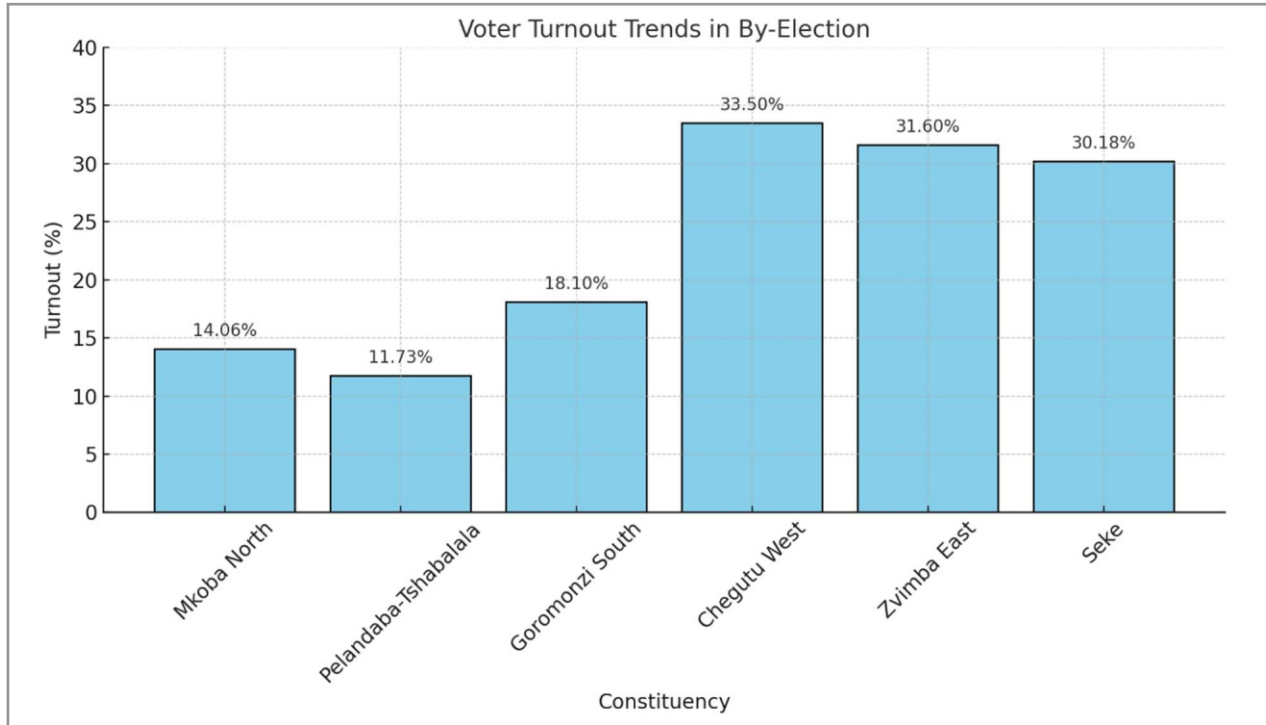
3.1. General Political Economy Environment

Political Environment

Zimbabwe has consistently adhered to its constitutional obligation to conduct regular and periodic elections every five years. However, while the country maintains the rhythm of elections, the quality of its electoral processes remains under scrutiny. A key informant emphasised that *"while the country is consistent in holding elections, the electoral system faces several challenges: political, legal, administrative, and economic"* (KII with Female Elections Expert). These systemic flaws continue to erode public confidence in electoral processes. Most of the participants in the study noted that they hardly engage with their local Members of Parliament (MPs) and Councillors. The responses revealed a profound lack of trust and connection between citizens and their elected representatives. This sentiment was largely attributed to controversial leadership recalls, which many felt undermined democratic processes. One participant remarked, *"There are people who were voted for by the community, but they are no longer in office because they were recalled. This makes people lose confidence in the electoral system."* These observations resonate with a ZESN study that shows that the recalls eroded the people's confidence in electoral processes as signified by the low voter turnout during the by-elections. For instance the ZESN study indicate that voter turnout in the six constituencies was significantly low for the February 2024 by-elections (ZESN, 2024:11). The Figure 10 summarises the voter turnout sitting at an average of 23.6% which is usually lower than the standard average of 47.7% that tend to characterise previous by-elections



Figure 10: February 2024 By-elections Voter Turnout.



The impact of the recalls on citizens' perception and participation in elections needs no overstatement. ZESN (2024) surmises this "...the influence of recalls on the democratic character of elections is apparent in the decreasing voter participation witnessed in by-elections after the 2023 Harmonised Elections. In a show of voter apathy, the total number of votes cast per Constituency was notably way below the votes garnered by the winning candidate alone in the August 2023 Harmonised Elections". This observation by ZESN affirmed the views of citizens' who participated in stakeholder consultations. Others pointed to the growing perception that political representatives, regardless of their party, appear aligned with the ruling elite. *"Even the opposition MPs and councillors seem captured or co-opted. You can't tell the difference anymore,"* noted another attendee. In most cases, the relationship between citizens and elected representatives is described as complicated and tense. A woman representative had this to say, *"The relationship is complicated because they have the habit of bossing people around, forcing people to dance to their tune"* (Women, FGD). In some instances, the relationship was described as extortionist as

the leadership would demand allowances and perks to attend meetings. For instance, a civil society representative reckoned, *"Some when invited they ask about fuel and honorarium first before confirming the meeting"* (Bulawayo FGD). In addition, issues of gender insensitivity were raised. A woman representative had this to say, *"Recently a meeting was called by our local councillor. The time for the meeting was 6pm. Is that time accommodative for women and girls? It's a way of excluding us as women and girls"* (Women FGD).

A recurring theme was the **absence of elected leaders after elections**, with many describing them as "invisible" in their constituencies. This disconnection, participants argued, has caused community grievances to go unheard and unresolved. As one youth representative put it, *"The leaders only come during campaigns. After that, you won't see them again. They forget the people who voted for them."* An FGD participant in Mazowe also weighed in, saying that, *"we last saw councillors and members of parliament (MPs) when we were voting for them"*. Similar sentiments were also shared in Matabeleland, *"After votes the relationship becomes too formal as unlike during the campaign period. It becomes difficult for the electorate to approach them as there are conditions that are put in place to seek an audience with them"* (Women FGD). This sense of abandonment was very widespread and continued to filter in almost all areas enumerated, *"I think our relationship is only about voting for each other and then after you won't see them and it becomes goodbye forever"* (Bulawayo, Women FGD) while in Masvingo another a civil society representative described it as, *"It's a good morning during elections and goodbye forever"* (Masvingo CSO KII). This sense of abandonment and perceived self-enrichment by leaders, who prioritise personal gain over community development, has fuelled growing cynicism, especially among young people who feel that engaging in electoral politics is a futile exercise. There is a general sense of frustration and concern about the political environment and its impact on community engagement.

In as much as there is generally widespread disillusionment with local leadership by citizens, **All Hope is Not Lost**. There are pockets of positive local leadership-residents relationships which may act as learning points for areas with challenges. In Nkulumane, it was observed that, *"Both our Councillor and MP are very active and engage with residents..."* (Women FGD). Similar sentiments were also expressed in Mashonaland Central, as the woman representative asserted, *"In Mvurwi is relatively peaceful. Our representatives in the local government and parliament are very visible and engaging"* (Women FGD). Matabeleland North also provided a glimmer of positive relations as one attendee noted, *"... in Hwange we have a visible and more engaging councillor. Just that the ground is not level politically"* (Women FGD). It was also observed some leaders work well with their community. An attendee had this to say, *"We do have other leaders*

who work well with us, especially the local and traditional leaders. When we go and have a meeting in the rural areas they do come and work with us. So, it is not all of them that are difficult to work with" (Harare/Mashonaland East FGD). The leadership in rural areas was perceived to be more engaging in comparison to those in the urban areas. It was noted that, *"Most Rural Councillors are workable on the ground as compared to some Urban ones as they are always busy"* (Women FGD).

Economic Environment.

In all the enumerated areas, respondents complained of the harsh macroeconomic conditions and deteriorating livelihood opportunities by citizens. In Mashonaland East, both urban and rural, as in other areas across Zimbabwe, residents face acute economic hardship marked by high unemployment and widespread poverty. Many households rely heavily on informal trading, small-scale businesses, aid, and remittances. Despite these efforts, hunger and poverty persist. As one participant noted, *"We are forced to reduce meals or go hungry just to survive the month"* (Harare Mashonaland/East FGD). Various speakers pointed toward a strong dependence on the informal sector as a means of survival. Youth representatives and community participants frequently cited unemployment as a pressing challenge, suggesting that many resort to informal trading, vending, or small-scale agriculture to make ends meet. One participant noted, *"Most of us are hustling, selling airtime, doing piece jobs just to survive."* This indicates a reliance on non-formalised economic activity due to limited access to stable employment. In some communities, especially those with vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities or the elderly, livelihoods appear to depend heavily on social support systems. These include government grants, diaspora remittances, or assistance from local organisations. A participant shared, *"Our members rely on grants, but they are not enough. Sometimes we get help from NGOs or church groups to fill the gap."* This highlights the critical role of external aid in sustaining basic livelihoods.

Urban agriculture was identified as one of how families are earning a living. A participant had this to say, *"As an addition to all contributions made, most of the families in my area now do urban subsistence farming. They do a lot of mushroom farming and hydroponics"* (Byo, FGD). Youth are stated to be relying on casual work as observed by a female participant, *"Youngsters are also making a living in areas where people are building houses; they either become daka-boys or will be selling river sand and other items "taken" elsewhere"* (Ibid). In some instances, it was observed that some of the young people are into "gambling and sex work" to eke a living. Also, it is interesting that for those in formal work, they have to dabble in the informal sector to make ends meet. For instance, professionals like teachers were reported to be supplementing their meagre

salaries by conducting extra lessons. It was observed that, *“Yes, extra lessons are a challenge. You find a teacher demanding extra lessons even for grade ones”* (FGD participant Byo). This is believed to have been caused by salary attrition for those in the formal sector. An FGD participant remarked, *“Salaries have been eroded, most women have resorted to selling almost everything, I mean everything. The market is flooded, everyone is selling broiler chickens. No profits realised. It's difficult”* (Women FGD).

The economic environment was reportedly characterised by high levels of corruption in both urban and rural settings. Citizens complained of corrupt practices by public officials. A woman representative noted that, *“Corruption has made the economy much more difficult for women. When vending spaces or business spaces are allocated by Councillors and District Officers, they are allocated to men who are able to pay bribes and women using sextortion. This is unreachable to any other woman or youth”* (Women FGD). Another participant quipped as well, *“The economic environment is very tense for us as vendors. We are always chased day in day out as we try to eke fees for our children. As for the police, instead of protecting us, they demand their ration (read bribe)”* (Women FGD). The high levels of corruption, extortion and demand for bribes by authorities have worsened the situation to the point where corruption has been normalised, and citizens can no longer demand any form of accountability.

3.2. Voter Registration

The section explores voter registration patterns, disparities across regions and demographics, and structural barriers to civic participation. Insights from study participants are analysed. The participants demonstrated that the majority are aware of the requirements for voter registration. However, some challenges were identified and are discussed below.

a. Lack of Proper Documentation for Voter Registration

One challenge reported by participants, particularly Persons with Disabilities in Mutare and Marondera, as well as youth in Nyanyadzi and Mutare, and those who took part in online round tables, was the lack of essential identity documents required for voter registration. It was established that some individuals in these communities did not possess a national identity card both of which are mandatory for registration. Participants shared that some youths, especially those who grew up in informal settlements or rural areas, had never been formally registered at birth. Consequently, they struggled to acquire birth certificates, which automatically barred them from obtaining national IDs and registering as voters. For example, a participant in the Chimanimani district rural ward remarked,

Vamweni vechidoko avazi kumboona zvitupa zvavo zvekubarwa kwavo, let alone IDs; vanozyoresa sei kana vasingazivikanwi ngehurumende? (Some young people have never seen their birth certificates, let alone an ID; how can they register if they are invisible to the state?)

Similarly, in Mutare and Marondera, persons with disabilities expressed frustration over the lack of tailored support to assist them in acquiring documentation, noting that disability-related stigmas sometimes prevented their families from securing the necessary paperwork during childhood. One of the participants in Marondera highlighted that,

Dzimwe nguva vabereki vakazvara kwana anehurema vanoona sezvisina kukosha kumutoresa birth certificate nekuti vanofunga kuti haazokwanise kuzvishandira ega saka harina basa izvo zvinova zvinozotadzisa vazhinji vedu kuno nyoresa kuvhota (Sometimes parents who gave birth to a child with a disability feel that it is not necessary to take his/her birth certificate because they think s/he will not be able to work on his/her own so it doesn't matter; which will prevent many of us from registering to vote)

The youth FGD in Mutare also highlighted the challenges that some youths face in acquiring proper documentation due to broken marriages and, at times, the deaths of some parents. As such, some children are left without birth certificates and are likewise unable to obtain the required national IDs for voter registration. An example of touts was provided as some of the individuals who fall into this category. As one respondent highlighted, some of these touts are among the undocumented individuals, lacking proper documentation due to childhood neglect, orphanhood, or broken family structures. This group, despite being of voting age, rarely registers as voters because they lack both the necessary documents and the means to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles.

b. Lack of Interest in Registering as Voters

Another important outcome among youth participants was apathy and disinterest in the voter registration process. The study shows that many young people are skeptical about the value of voting, believing that elections would not lead to meaningful change. Perceptions of electoral manipulation, political violence, and the dominance of entrenched political elites fuelled this lack of interest. One youth participant from Mutare summarised this sentiment:

Handingambopedzi nguwa yangu ndichinyoresa kuvhota ndichiziva kuti hapana chinombochinja pasinei nekuti ndiani anonga ahwina. (I can't waste my time registering to vote, knowing that nothing ever changes no matter who wins).

Another participant in the Masvingo-Midlands virtual roundtable argues that:



the reason why people are not registered is because they have lost trust in the voting process and the election as being one sided therefore they choose not to go and vote

While this attitude reflects a lack of interest and perhaps ignorance, it can also be a conscious withdrawal driven by political distrust. Economic constraints also played a role. Many youths prioritised their day-to-day livelihoods over political participation, stating that the time and resources needed to register were inadequate given their precarious economic conditions.

A key informant also raised the issue of urban-rural voter registration disparity, she observed that, "Harare had approximately 900,000 registered voters from a projected 1.4 million eligible voters, a massive shortfall." This gap not only reflected administrative inefficiencies but also pointed to broader issues of political disengagement and disenfranchisement among urban populations.

c. Lack of Adequate and Timely Information on Voter Registration

Participants also highlighted a lack of widespread, non-partisan, and accessible information on voter registration, particularly affecting youth and marginalised communities. Information about mobile voter registration drives, ID issuance, and registration deadlines was often distributed along party lines. An online roundtable discussion and physical FGDs in Mutare and Nyanyadzi shared the same sentiments, in which participants reported that at times, political parties, especially the ruling party, were/was the primary source of such information, creating inequities in access. Communities aligned with the ruling party were better informed about upcoming registration exercises, while others remained unaware and missed opportunities to register. "If you're not close to the ruling party, you won't know when the mobile ID truck is coming to your area," shared a person with disability from Marondera FGD.

d. Gendered and Disability Barriers


Gender inequality emerged as another barrier affecting women's access to voter registration and political participation in Zimbabwe, as highlighted in the women's virtual roundtable discussion

group. Participants described how unpaid care responsibilities, including childcare, household chores, and caring for elderly relatives, placed additional time constraints on women, making it difficult for them to visit registration centres. Cultural and patriarchal norms further restricted women's ability to make independent political decisions, with some women needing permission from their husbands or male family members to register or vote. Participants also raised concerns about women's fear of political violence and intimidation, which discouraged them from engaging in the electoral process. These gendered barriers combined to limit women's civic participation and reinforced their political marginalisation. A participant from the group reported:



"Vamwe vakadzi vanoda mvumo kubva kuvarume vavo or hama dzechirume kuti vakwanise kuno register kuvhota" (Some women need their husband's permission to register or vote.)


Another one also remarked that:



Dzimwe nguva vakadzi vanoshaiwa nguva yekuno register kuvhota nenyaya yekuti basa repamaba rinenge rakawanda rakafanana nekuchengeta vana pamba especially kana uine mwana mucheche haukwanise kubva pamba uchimusiya izvo zvinita kuti usongosiyana nezvekunonyoresa kuvhota. (Sometimes women don't have time to register to vote because their daily household jobs are a lot like taking care of children at home especially if you have a baby, you can't leave them home alone. Which makes you just stop registering to vote).

These remarks highlight structural and cultural barriers that prevent women from exercising equal political rights.

In addition, persons with disabilities face multiple barriers to registering and participating in elections. These challenges include the physical inaccessibility of voter registration centres, making it difficult or impossible for those with mobility impairments to access services. As one participant highlighted:



Ndikashaiwa munhu unondibetsera nemotor or bhara kuenda kuno register kuvhota or kuvhota kwacho handikwanisi kuenda ndenga sezvaurikuona kuti madondoro acho apera hachaiti kuti ndiende kure nawo. (If I do not get someone to assist me with transport to go and register to vote, I will not manage).

Participants also noted the absence of materials in accessible formats, such as braille or sign language interpretation, which prevents visually and hearing-impaired individuals from receiving vital information about the registration process.

Dzimwe nguva hama dzedu dzisinganzwe dzikashaiwa unozovaudza nesign language vanogona kusatoziva zvirikuitika uye kuva neinformation yakakwana about registration to vote zvinoita kuti vasarire muchirongwa ichocho. (Sometimes our deaf relatives who are in need of sign language may not even know what is happening and having sufficient information about registering to vote can prevent them from being left behind in the process)

Furthermore, it emerged that there is a lack of targeted, disability-inclusive voter education campaigns to raise awareness and support persons with disabilities in exercising their right to vote. As one KII disability rights advocate observed, "...people with disabilities are not even an afterthought; they're invisible," underscoring how systemic neglect reinforces their political marginalisation and exclusion from civic processes. These barriers, summarised in the picture below, collectively undermine the democratic inclusion of persons with disabilities, limiting their voice and representation in electoral outcomes.

Table 1: Barriers to voting for persons with disabilities



Source: Authors

3.3. Voters Roll Inspection

The voters' roll inspection forms a critical stage of participation in the electoral process. It is at this stage that citizens can verify if they are on the voters' roll and have a chance to vote in elections. Additionally, at this stage, citizens can correct any incorrect details or information that may potentially prejudice them. For instance, ZESN (2013) claims that in the 2013 elections, over 750,000 urban voters were turned away for multiple reasons, including reporting to the wrong stations and mismatched details. It is through voter roll inspection that such glitches may be avoided, as evidenced by the low voter turnout in the 2013 elections. In response to the aforementioned challenges, ZEC expanded the range of methods that voters could use to inspect the voters' roll, like availing the USSD platform and also the online portal. In the 2018 elections, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission sent 3,256,440 SMS messages to registrants nationwide. At the same time, an estimated 916,001 people verified their details using the *265# mobile network platform, which was supported by Telecel, Netone, and Econet (ZEC, 2018).

The stakeholder consultations revealed that voter registration inspection is the stage that experiences low participation by citizens. The reasons proffered to explain this were inadequate publicity of the process by ZEC, a misunderstanding of the purpose of the inspections, and disenchantment with the system. A youth advocate working on elections claimed that *"ZEC ambushes citizens' when making announcements on critical stages of the election. In the 2023 elections, they only announced voters roll inspection only four days before and also gave it a limited period of five days"* (Youth CSO, KII). Such approaches to key electoral processes have certainly the outcome of limited participation by citizens'. A women representative also weighed in, *"Most of the people do not understand or find the importance of the voters roll inspection. People take it for granted that once you have registered yourself or voted in the previous elections, everything will be fine"* (Women, FGD). This may not be surprising as political parties hardly give importance to this process. For instance, during the 2018 elections, the Inspection Centres visited by ZESN during voter roll inspection had only 4% with party agents and 3% with citizen observers, with the majority of political party candidates



coming from ZANU PF (ZESN, 2018). The low or poor participation at the voter's roll inspection stage may also be attributed to disenchantment with the political system. Overall, there is widespread belief that elections are now a futile misadventure and a waste of time. A person with disability advocate had this to say, *"It does not make sense to go through difficulties to try to see if you are on the voters roll, for elections that you clearly know will be rigged. So, the question is why bother yourself? Also, we not considered as people enough"* (Byo, Persons With Disabilities, FGD).

3.4. Voting

Voter apathy in Zimbabwe remains a serious challenge to democratic participation. The study revealed that this apathy stems from various interconnected factors affecting different groups of people.



3.4.1. Lack of Interest in Political Candidates and Their Agendas

One of the main drivers of voter apathy, which came out during consultations, is the lack of connection between citizens and political leaders. Many respondents feel that candidates do not represent their interests or address their daily struggles. Participants highlighted that political messages are often repetitive every campaign period, offering few practical solutions. As one participant explained,

People are not interested in candidates who do not speak to their daily struggles or offer practical solutions to their daily struggles. (K11)

The lack of connection between political leaders and voters is particularly discouraging for younger voters, who are eager for leadership that relates to their everyday struggles to make a visible and meaningful impact. The younger voters end up concluding that their vote does not matter or count as there will be no meaningful change from leaders, as highlighted by youth in Mutare Central and Marondera persons with disabilities FGDs:

The vote does not matter, hence no need to vote for

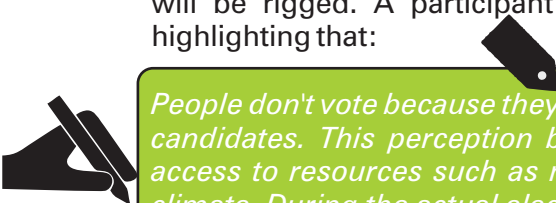
As such, without leaders who inspire confidence or hope, many choose not to participate.

3.4.2. Perceived Bias of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and the Judiciary

Distrust in electoral institutions, particularly the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, also contributes to voter apathy. Many participants believe that the ZEC is not neutral but instead serves the interests of the ruling party. This perception leads voters to feel that elections are unfair and that outcomes are predetermined. A participant from an FGD highlighted this by saying, “There is a perception that ZEC is not independent, that it serves the interests of the ruling party.” Compounding this perceived bias is a lack of faith in electoral outcomes, with participants citing manipulation and perceived rigging as major deterrents. One KII summed up the mood by saying, “*The results are already known before the election. So why waste time voting?*” The judiciary and democratic institutions were also criticised as biased towards the ruling party, particularly around political interference. One speaker pointed to the recent wave of parliamentary recalls after the 2023 elections, stating, “*The courts are no longer neutral; they are tools in the hands of politicians.*” Such developments were cited as evidence of judicial capture, weakening the rule of law and discouraging meaningful voter participation. As a result, people lose confidence in the electoral process and feel there is no point in voting if their vote will not count.

3.4.3. Vote Rigging Perceptions

Perceptions that elections are always rigged were seen to be undermining faith in the utility of elections. There is a significant portion of people who find no value in going to vote as elections will be rigged. A participant in one of the Virtual FGD summarised these perceptions by highlighting that:



People don't vote because they perceive the environment to be rigged in favour of certain political candidates. This perception begins in the pre-election phase, where there are disparities in access to resources such as media coverage, freedom to campaign, and the general political climate. During the actual election period, trust in the integrity of the electoral process is further undermined by widespread concerns about the independence and impartiality of the ZEC. Perceptions regarding the composition and conduct of ZEC often raise questions about its ability to act as a fair and neutral regulator. As such, people would rather focus on bread-and-butter issues than lose time by going to the polls.

This apathy is not merely a reflection of indifference, but rather a symptom of deep-seated disillusionment with an electoral system perceived as neither fair nor responsive.

3.4.4. Disillusionment with the Impact of One's Vote

The study also found widespread disappointment among citizens who feel that voting does not lead to real change. Many voters said they had voted before, but their lives had remained unchanged. One participant voiced this frustration: *"People vote and nothing changes. The roads remain the same, the clinics are still without medicine, so why bother?"* (Mashonaland East FGD). This sense of hopelessness has led many people to stop voting or even register to vote. The belief that elections will not lead to tangible improvements has become entrenched, particularly among those who have voted for decades without seeing progress. Disappointments are particularly strong among older generations who have endured years of voting without witnessing any positive changes in their lives from the promises politicians made to them. One elderly participant in an FGD from Matabeleland remarked that, *"I have voted in every election since 1980 but, nothing has changed. Politicians only remember us when they want votes"*.

Another participant in a virtual FGD from Mashonaland Central supported the same views by highlighting that *"The reasons why some registered voters did not vote was that the elections do not bring change. Whether the ruling party lost or not, the party would not accept defeat"*. Likewise, many young people expressed frustration that voting does not improve their lives. A youth participant from Matabeleland said: *"We keep voting, but our lives don't change; there's still no water, no jobs, and no roads."* This perception that elections fail to address poverty, unemployment, and inadequate services discourages many youths from voting. The study findings align with those from a study by Moyo-Nyede and Mpako (2022), which concluded that fewer than half of the youth demographic approve of the way the president, members of Parliament, and local government councillors have performed their jobs.

This disillusionment is further cemented by the prevailing economic situation, which has forced many into a hand-to-mouth existence. This aligns with Matenga (2020), who observed that persistent economic challenges have led to disillusionment with the political process, with many citizens perceiving elections as ineffective in addressing socio-economic issues. Voter Fatigue has created significant disillusionment with elections as noted in the following sentiments, *"There's a high pervasive sentiment amongst the populace that elections will not bring significant change. Voter fatigue is REAL Some feel like the electoral process is flawed"* (Byo FGD).


There is a general belief that elections are a waste of time because they are often perceived as rigged. Three participants shared the following sentiments, *"Some are not voting citing it's a futile exercise as elections are always rigged..."*, *"...people don't vote because it is the same..."* and *"There apathy caused by perceived irregularities, there is need to address them for voters to believe in the process"* (Women FGD). This shows lack of faith in electoral processes.

3.4.5. Specific Challenges for Persons with Disabilities

Persons with Disabilities highlighted that they face unique challenges that limit their participation in elections. These challenges include:


- **Poor accessibility**

A discussion with persons with disabilities reveals that they face limitations in participating in elections due to poor accessibility to voter registration centres, inspection sites, and polling stations, particularly in rural areas. Some polling stations are located far from their homes, making travel challenging. Discussions in Mutare and Marondera indicated that those who use wheelchairs and crutches have difficulty accessing the voting centres; as a result, they often do not participate in the voting process. Furthermore, *disability exclusion* remains a critical issue, as Persons with Disabilities are often left out of electoral considerations entirely. A Disability Rights Activist highlighted the extent of this neglect, stating, “Persons with Disabilities *are not even an afterthought, they're invisible.*” This lack of inclusivity underscores the urgent need for comprehensive electoral reforms that ensure accessibility and equal participation for all, regardless of gender or physical ability. In some cases, visually impaired individuals also require assistance to vote, which may not be available at the time. One of the visually impaired participants in Marondera highlighted that:




Ndinoda kubatsirwa kufamba kunotarisa zita rangu muvoters roll nekuzonovhota kwacho kana zuva racho rasvika asi, dzimwe nguva pananenge pasina anokwanisa kundibatsira ndinobva ndatadza kuenda” (I need help to go check my name on the voters' roll and then vote when the day comes, but sometimes when there is no one to help me, I can't go.)

Another participant in an on-line FGD with persons with disabilities also highlighted the same views by stating that:




Persons with disabilities do vote, mostly those in urban areas. However, the last elections of 2023 were kind of hectic due to the delimitation exercise that had been done. There was not enough awareness among persons with disabilities, they had to discover their polling stations on the day of voting and those with mobility challenges had to abandon the voting because of that confusion. Some could not wait because of the time that the voting process ended as some ended very late. These are issues, that impact more on a person with a disability than on a person with no disability.



- **Lack of assistive technologies**

One of the reasons for apathy among persons with disabilities was a lack of assistive technologies and voter education materials tailored for their needs. For instance, the use of braille ballots was perceived to bring secrecy and ensure visual impaired voters that they are safe from retribution for making a wrong political choice. One participant noted in an FGD in Mutare that:



Zvinhu zve ZEC hazvienderane nevasingaoni, hapana braille isu vanhu vasingaone. Sekudaro handinzwe kusununguka kuti ndiende kunovhota nekuti handizivi kuti munhu ari kundibatsira aisa vhoti yangu kwandingadai ndakavaudza kuti vanovhota. (ZEC material does not cater for the visually impaired people, there is no braille for us who cannot see. As such, I don't feel comfortable going to go and cast my vote because I don't know if the person assisting me has put my vote where I would have told them to cast it)

- **Name changes and transfers**

Participants also highlighted that some of the challenges they face, which cause apathy among the persons with disabilities community during election time, are name changes and transfers. This forces some people, including persons with disabilities to move from one station to another to check their names—an extra burden for those with mobility challenges. Since they required assistance, they did not have the luxury to move around checking their names; thus, they ended up giving up. This was further complicated by long queues on voting day, which made it hard for those with physical disabilities to stand and wait for extended periods.

- **Political tensions and fear of victimisation,**

Based on the information from the field, political tension and fear of victimisation also contributed to voter apathy among persons with disabilities, which discouraged some from participating, as highlighted in the Mutare Focus Group Discussion: “Political tensions, limited participation, as it scared some willing voters for fear of victimisation and persecution.”

These factors combine to make the voting process inaccessible and discouraging for many persons with disabilities, leading to their exclusion from civic participation.

3.4.6. Lack of Civic and Voter Education Among the Youth

The study also found that many young people lack civic and voter education. One youth admitted: *"Most young people don't know how voting connects to the issues they face; no one teaches them that."* Others noted that they grew up believing politics is dangerous or corrupt: *"We grew up hearing that politics is dirty or dangerous, so we learn to stay away."*

Additionally, some young people could not vote because they were recruited as polling agents in places outside their constituencies. As one participant explained: *"Youth were recruited as polling agents; some were placed in areas outside their voting areas, thus not able to cast their votes despite being registered voters."* Youth FGD participant in Mutare.

3.4.7. The Role of Competing Needs and Priorities

The study also highlighted that one of the critical factors driving low voter turnout is the reality of competing needs and priorities among citizens, particularly within economically marginalised communities. For many Zimbabweans, daily survival takes precedence over political engagement, a dynamic shaped by the country's protracted economic crisis characterised by high unemployment, inflation, and widespread poverty (Masunungure, 2014). Economic hardships force individuals into informal and insecure livelihoods, where time and resources are directed toward securing income rather than participating in electoral processes. As Bratton (1999) notes, in contexts of economic hardship, political participation is often deprioritised in favour of *"immediate material concerns."* This reality is evident in urban and peri-urban Zimbabwe, where citizens spend long hours engaged in informal trade or precarious employment, leaving little opportunity to register or vote.

A KII respondent articulated this sentiment: *"People are in survival mode. When you don't know where your next meal is coming from, the last thing on your mind is going to be registering to vote."* This reflects the view that political engagement is not the priority activity, accessible only when basic needs are met. Furthermore, the youth in Mutare FGD highlighted that due to the uncertainty of the election results and the possibility of elections in changing their situation, what they termed the "then what" scenario, they would rather focus on their everyday hustles and business rather than committing to vote further driving voter apathy amongst the youth.

People would rather pursue livelihood activities than going to vote. For instance a female participant quipped that *"My children are registered, but they did not vote. They prioritised*

survival than politics as most are informal trade" (Byo FGD). This has also been necessitated by the fact that there is now loss of confidence in elections as a vehicle for bringing social development and change. One participant observed that, *"Political fatigue, especially among youth, due to repeated unfulfilled promises"*, whilst another one similarly observed that, *"Some people especially youths say even if they vote there is no change looking at the issue of employment, majority are unemployed so they rather go look for greener pastures outside Zimbabwe so there is a low turnout of youths voting"* (Byo FGD).

3.4.8. Structural and Logistical Challenges

In line with findings from scholars like Sachikonye, structural barriers such as the lack of identification documents and high costs associated with accessing voting and registration centres further entrench voter apathy among economically disadvantaged groups (Sachikonye, 2005). The study also highlighted structural and logistical problems that discourage voting.

- **Intimidation by political parties**, such as setting up tents and desks near polling stations, discouraged some voters from casting their ballots. Participants highlighted that during the 2023 harmonised elections, in some polling stations, known party members from one of the contesting political parties set up tents to intimidate voters.
- **Long queues on voting day** make it difficult for people with disabilities and those balancing other responsibilities to wait long enough to vote.
- **Election fatigue**, especially among older voters who feel let down by politicians over the years. One elderly participant said, "I have voted in every election since 1980, but nothing has changed. Politicians only remember us when they want votes."

3.5. Participation in Civic and Electoral Processes

Years of socio-economic stagnation and unfulfilled political promises have caused widespread disillusionment. Citizens question whether voting or participation in civic processes can truly bring about change, especially when previous elections have failed to improve their lives. One participant articulated this frustration, saying, *"People vote and nothing changes. The roads remain the same, the clinics are still without medicine so why bother?"* This cynicism has become deeply entrenched, deterring many from even registering to vote, let alone participating on Election Day.

The stakeholder consultations revealed several deeply rooted issues affecting civic participation in Zimbabwe, with the *centralization of power* emerging as a significant concern. Although the concept of devolution is frequently discussed, its practical implementation remains underdeveloped, resulting in a sense of powerlessness among elected officials and voter disillusionment. As one participant noted, *"We talk about devolution, but it's not being practiced. The people we elect have no real power. So why bother voting?"* This disconnection between citizens and governance structures discourages participation and fosters voter apathy. Closely linked to this is the issue of *youth disengagement*. Many young people view politics as irrelevant or corrupt, a sentiment captured by a Youth Civic Educator who remarked, *"Most young people I work with have never voted. They say politics is dirty and doesn't feed them. We need to rebuild their belief in systems."* This lack of engagement signals a broader crisis of confidence in democratic institutions and highlights the need for more targeted efforts to involve young people in civic life.

Additionally, *gender-based barriers* continue to hinder women's participation in political processes. Deep-seated cultural norms and systemic discrimination contribute to the marginalization of women, creating invisible yet powerful obstacles. A Women's Rights Advocate expressed this struggle, saying, *"There's an invisible wall between women and politics. Culture says it's not our space, and when we try, we're told we're being too ambitious."* These attitudes not only discourage women from running for office but also limit their influence in decision-making spaces. Intimidation and fear also emerged as central in informing people's participation in civic and electoral processes. One lady had this to say, *"With the current shrink in the civic space, crack down on activism, and arrest of activists, I will choose to go and grow sweet potatoes"* (Byo FGD). Coupled with the realities of a tough economic environment, people have found it better to focus on livelihood opportunities as opposed to spending time on civic and electoral participation. Another participant had this to say, *"I would personally prefer participating in a demo but sentiments from my colleagues say they would go for their livelihoods"* (Byo FGD). An FGD attendee was more emphatic, *"...most women spent their time at the market. So, there is no time to leave the market and go and vote or attend a meeting. It's a waste of time, because time is money. I can't take thirty minutes to go and vote without any change coming; yet come the evening children will need to eat"* (Women FGD). Additionally, the stakeholder consultations revealed that citizens found it not useful to participate in civic and electoral processes as the consultations are mostly tokenistic and insincere. An FGD participant had to say, *"Residents are invited to contribute but the truth is the budget has already been done. We are being used as pawns on a chessboard"* (Women FGD). Such sentiments create a disconnect between citizens and civic processes as they believe that their voice will not be heard.

4. Strategic Observation

The study reveals that voter apathy in Zimbabwe is not a result of a single factor, but rather a complex interplay of political, institutional, cultural, and logistical barriers. From distrust in electoral bodies and disillusionment with political promises to gender-based and disability-related challenges, many Zimbabweans feel excluded or discouraged from participating in elections. Addressing these issues will require comprehensive reforms, greater transparency, inclusive practices, and civic education to rebuild trust and motivate all citizens to engage in the democratic process.

In terms of voter registration, it emerged that there are disparities in voter registration rates between rural and urban areas. Participants reported higher registration rates in rural areas, primarily attributed to targeted logistical support and the proximity of mobile registration units provided by the ZEC. In contrast, urban centres exhibited lower registration due to logistical constraints, competing life demands, and inefficient service delivery. This finding aligns with electoral studies in sub-Saharan Africa, where rural areas often experience higher administrative mobilisation and turnout due to state-driven voter mobilisation campaigns (Bratton, 2008). Conversely, urban voters face competing economic and temporal pressures that hinder participation (Makumbe, 2006). Participants emphasised that urban dwellers are "too busy trying to survive," underscoring the intersection between socio-economic precarity and civic disengagement.

Structural challenges such as inadequate civic education, scepticism toward electoral outcomes, and the absence of youth-focused registration drives emerged as drivers of young people's unwillingness to register unless inspired by relatable candidates. The literature supports these concerns, pointing to widespread youth apathy across Africa linked to perceptions of entrenched political elites and limited policy responsiveness (Resnick & Casale, 2011). As noted by one participant, "the youth are not apathetic by nature; they are looking for leaders they can believe in," echoing findings by Mattes and Bratton (2007) that trust in political actors is a primary motivator for youth engagement.

Another key strategic observation from the fieldwork is that gender inequality remains a significant barrier to women's access to voter registration and political participation in Zimbabwe. Structural and socio-cultural factors, including the burden of unpaid care work, restrictive cultural norms, patriarchal control, and exposure to political violence, continue to limit women's civic

agency and autonomy. Existing literature confirms that gendered power relations constrain women's political participation in Africa (Tripp et al., 2009; Goetz, 2003).

One of the key drivers of voter apathy in Zimbabwe is the entrenched public perception that the electoral environment is structurally skewed in favour of the ruling party, manifested through disproportionate media access, uneven campaign conditions, and a lack of confidence in the neutrality of electoral institutions such as the ZEC. As a result, citizens, particularly the economically marginalised, are more inclined to prioritise immediate bread-and-butter issues over engaging in elections they believe are predetermined and lacking in credibility. This observation aligns with Bratton (2006), who argues that when electoral processes are perceived as uncompetitive or manipulated, citizens are less likely to participate, as elections lose their meaning as vehicles for accountability and change. On another note, religion and spirituality have been key factors explaining citizens' growing apathy. The shift from a teleological natural being to the supernatural being by citizens has undermined their belief in the agency to change society. Citizens have surrendered everything to God. This underscores the need to engage religious and faith leaders in promoting good stewardship and citizenship.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal a connection among political, economic, and structural factors contributing to voter apathy in Zimbabwe. At the heart of the issue lies widespread and deepening discouragement with the country's political leadership and electoral processes. While elections are regularly held, many citizens, particularly youth, women, and marginalised communities, feel increasingly disconnected from and excluded by the democratic system. This disconnection is exacerbated by leadership recalls, fragmentation of political parties, a lack of responsiveness from elected officials, gender-insensitive practices, and a prevailing perception of elite capture across the political divide. In many areas, elected leaders are viewed as invisible after elections, contributing to a growing sense of abandonment and hopelessness among voters.

Economically, Zimbabweans face serious conditions characterised by high unemployment, salary erosion, inflation, and deepening poverty. Citizens, especially women and youth, are heavily reliant on informal work and survival strategies which have created competition with one's need to fulfil up their civic duty and responsibility. A citizen is faced with the choice of spending hours in a voting queue or participate in civic processes versus hustling for livelihoods within the economy. In most of these cases, citizens have shown a preponderance towards resolving the livelihood question first. Corruption, particularly in the allocation of economic opportunities like vending

spaces, has compounded these challenges, disproportionately affected women and youth and further alienating them from formal political participation. These systemic economic and governance failures are undermining trust in public institutions and reinforcing the belief that voting does not lead to tangible improvements in people's lives.

A significant structural barrier to voter engagement is the lack of proper documentation, such as national identity particularly among youths and persons with disabilities. This legal and administrative barrier directly undermines the right to vote and highlights the need for inclusive and accessible civil registration systems.

Reversing voter apathy in Zimbabwe requires a multi-faceted approach that combines structural reforms, strengthened political accountability, gender-sensitive leadership, and sustained civic education. Promoting inclusive economic development, addressing corruption, and creating genuine platforms for youth engagement are equally critical. For meaningful democratic participation to thrive, Zimbabwe's political actors and institutions must rebuild trust, demonstrate tangible responsiveness, and ensure that all citizens feel seen, heard, and empowered in shaping their nation's future.

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for consideration by various actors:

Political Parties

- The registration of political parties and adherence to constitutions compliant with the country's constitution are prerequisites for participating in national elections.
 - o The political party constitutions should make it mandatory to have gender and youth parity in the political parties.
- Political parties must take voter roll inspection seriously and mobilise their constituencies and voters to participate.
- There is the need for political parties to pursue non-judiciary electoral dispute resolution mechanisms.

Parliament

- Parliament is considering reforms to the Political Parties Finance Act to create “*special women's, Persons with Disabilities and youth funds*” that would support female candidates.
 - Additionally, this may involve creating an incentive to award more funding to political parties that meet certain prescribed threshold levels in terms of women, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and youth candidates.

Civil Society

- Civil society should advocate for enforceable quotas for women, Persons with Disabilities, and youth across all levels of governance.
 - These enforceable quotas are to go beyond parliament to include local government and party structures.
- Pursue sustained engagement on law enforcement and judicial institutions to maintain zero tolerance for violence and intimidation related to elections and civic processes.
- To adopt tailored and peer-led civic engagement, voter mobilisation, and campaign strategies targeting key groups such as women, Persons with Disabilities, and youth.
 - Youth engagement and interest in civic and electoral processes may be revived through relatable, creative approaches such as social media, the use of memes, short videos, podcasts, humour, and online talk shows, among others.
 - There is a need to engage young people where they are: online, in music, sports betting, and in the arts.
 - Peer-driven civic action. Marginalised or key groups need freedom and safe spaces to express ideas without fear. These special groups require environments where they can dream, debate, and disagree without worrying that someone might take notes to use against them later. Peer-to-peer mobilization can be powerful.
- Lobby ZEC to prioritise the inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in civic and electoral processes.
 - This may entail that all registration and polling sites comply with accessibility standards, with voter information available in braille, audio, large print, and sign language. Additionally, tools such as tactile ballots and mobile registration units may also be considered.
- To combat widespread voter apathy, there is a need to revamp civic and voter education to reflect local realities.

- o Community-based organizations may be key partners in reaching marginalised groups and last-mile communities.
- Institute a nationwide advocacy and campaign project on the restoration of trust in electoral systems.
 - o There is a need to convince citizens that elections work.
- Civil society needs to push for intergenerational dialogue to encourage first-time voters, especially at the community level.
 - o Promote intergenerational dialogue to bridge the gap between seasoned voters and first-time voters.
- A continuous voter education approach should be adopted. Voter education must be an ongoing effort because there are new voters in each voting period, and they must be encouraged to participate.
- Civil society will work with faith leaders to redefine and rejuvenate the role of faith-based organisations in advancing civic and electoral processes.
- Engage government to have special programmes to avail birth registration and identity documents to special groups such as youths and people with disability.

ZEC

- Automatic voter registration should be considered upon reaching the age of 18 and obtaining a national identity number.
 - o When someone obtains their first national ID, they should have a system in place to automatically register them on the voters' roll.
- ZEC to consider moving towards continuous voter education using all the 16 official languages.
- ZEC should consider publishing an election timetable with key dates for stages such as voter roll inspection, nomination, ballot printing and inspection, and the voting date.
- ZEC should accredit more players to complement its voter education efforts.

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VOTER APATHY RESEARCH REPORT

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