'New Dispensation, New Kids on the Block'. 'Ama 2000' and the 2023 Harmonised Elections in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Zimbabwe's political landscape has undergone significant changes since the 2017 coup, with the post-coup period being christened the 'New Dispensation'. The advent of the 'New Dispensation', characterised with promises of a new and revolving democracy, coincided with the coming of voting age of 'Ama 2000'. The paper investigated the electoral participation of 'Ama 2000' in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections. A theoretical framework that looked at factors that influence youth political participation was developed and used in explaining the electoral participation or their lack thereof. Hundred and fifteen focus group respondents between the ages of 18 to 23 were selected in Zimbabwe's cities of Harare and Bulawayo, wherein conversations on the motivations and barriers on youth political engagement were facilitated. Whilst 'Ama 2000' demonstrated political knowledge and interest, they are generally apathetic, with a few participating in voting whilst most did not associate with the other forms of electoral participation. Disillusionment with both politicians and political parties, politically motivated violence, and life cycle factors were the major reasons for their lack of interest in the country's 2023 elections. Arguably, there is no democratic and plural 'New Dispensation' after all, as these same factors have deterred older youth from participating in elections under the authoritarian Mugabe regime. However, the limited participation of 'Ama 2000' in voting demonstrates commitment to democratic principles and a desire to shape the country's future. To address the youth apathy gap, political parties must actively engage with them, reform, and promote inclusivity. At state level, structural reforms of an electoral nature are necessary to protect the security of the voter. Civil society has a role to play in strengthening civic education programs that instill a sense of civic duty and active

participation in democracy. By involving youth in the democratic process, Zimbabwe can build a foundation for inclusive political participation.

1. Introduction

Youth political participation is vital for the sustainable development and democratic governance of any nation. With 67.7% of Zimbabwe's population being under the age of 35 (UNICEF 2023), these youths represent a significant demographic group with immense potential to shape the political landscape. As the first generation to come of age in the post-Mugabe era, it is important to assess the level of political participation among 'Ama 2000' (those born after the turn of the millennium). 'Ama 2000' constitute the 2000 to 2010 cohort within Generation Z (Mahapatra et al. 2022). In the post-Mugabe era, most of the 'Ama 2000' were too young to have voted in the 2018 harmonised elections. 'Ama 2000' represent the youngest and most diverse demographic cohort in Zimbabwean society today, with two out of every three Zimbabweans being under the age of 25 (UNICEF 2023). 'Ama 2000' also represent the first generation to grow up entirely in the digital age, where social media, instant messaging, and online activism are the norm, thus shaping their unique characteristics and values.

Understanding the political participation of 'Ama 2000' in Zimbabwe is crucial for promoting democratic participation and ensuring that their voices are heard in the country's political process. While there have been studies on youth political participation in Zimbabwe (see Hodzi 2014; YETT 2017; Musarurwa 2018; Masunda 2023), there is a lack of research specifically focused on 'Ama 2000'. The existing literature on political participation in Zimbabwe primarily focuses on older generations, leaving a significant knowledge gap with regard to the political engagement of 'Ama 2000'. This research aims to fill this knowledge gap by examining the attitudes and motivations of this generation, more so in relation to the 2023 harmonised elections. The 2023 harmonised election in Zimbabwe provide a unique opportunity to assess the political participation of 'Ama 2000', as it is the first major election in which the majority of this generation will be eligible to vote.

The political landscape of Zimbabwe has undergone significant changes post the 2017 coup, and the 2023 harmonised elections were a crucial test of the country's democratic progress. The departure of long-time leader Robert Mugabe of the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) in 2017, coupled with the death of the long-time leader of the then main opposition Movement for Democratic Change

(MDC) Morgan Tsvangirai in early 2018, dramatically shifted the political landscape of the country. Zimbabwe, once characterised by a predominantly older generation of political leaders, witnessed a remarkable shift as younger people increasingly took over the reign, especially in the then opposition MDC, which has largely morphed into the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). For once, and in a long time, there was general excitement among Zimbabwe's populace and the international community at large that the economic and political fortunes of the country would make a turn for the better, with president Emmerson Mnangagwa making bold promises in 2017 that Zimbabwe would witness a departure from the toxic politics of the past, and that the country was moving towards the trajectory of a new and revolving democracy. Mnangagwa popularised the terms "New Dispensation"; "Second Republic"; "Open for Business" in an attempt to convince Zimbabweans and the world at large that his governance style would be different from that of his predecessor Robert Mugabe (Rwodzi 2019, 193). It is in that context that this paper sought to examine the political participation of the youth, in this case 'Ama 2000' in Zimbabwe, post the Mugabe era.

2. Literature review

As highlighted in the introduction, the aim of this study is to establish the political participation of 'Ama 2000' in Zimbabwe and identify the factors that influenced their participation or lack thereof in the 2023 harmonised elections. There is no single theoretical framework that can provide a comprehensive explanation for political participation in all age groups. Moreover, it is crucial to consider that the youth are heterogeneous, and the reasons that drive their engagement in politics as well as the means through which they choose to participate, are equally varied. In this section, a framework has been constructed based on different scholarly contributions on political participation, serving as a guiding principle for the paper. The first part of this section briefly conceptualises electoral political participation with the latter focussing on elements that could affect youth political participation.

2.1 Understanding electoral participation

Electoral (conventional) participation is a subset of political participation, with the latter referring to the involvement of individuals in political activities, processes, and institutions. As Verba and Nie (1972, 2-3) have indicated, political participation

encompasses actions that are intended to have an impact on the determination of governmental policies or exert influence on the individuals responsible for formulating these policies. (also see Verba et al. 2002, 11). Electoral political participation thus includes activities that are formally recognised by the government or established institutions. Examples include voting in elections, joining political parties, membership in political parties, donating money and time to politicians, and attending political rallies. These forms of participation have long been considered fundamental to democracy as they allow citizens to express their preferences and hold elected representatives accountable. This paper sought to investigate whether indeed urban youth in Zimbabwe, the 'Ama 2000' cohort, do participate in the highlighted modes of electoral participation.

2.2 Factors affecting youth voter turnout

Previous research has demonstrated how various factors impact on the political participation of individuals. These factors can be classified into three levels—namely micro (age, gender, life cycle factors, education, political efficacy); meso (family socialisation, peer pressure, trade union pressure); and macro level (democratic culture, patron client politics, party structures). The relevance of micro, meso, and macro factors in explaining electoral participation is an issue that was discussed in the focus groups conducted with 'Ama 2000".

2.3 Micro level factors

Age
Several studies in advanced democracies have examined the relationship between age and voter turnout globally, with findings indicating that age is a good predictor of political participation (See Dalton 2008; Smets and Van Ham 2013, 348; Weiss 2020). A similar pattern has also been established in Africa, with survey data showing that the relationship between age and three forms of electoral participation (voting, contacting, and collective action) is curvilinear, with younger people less likely to participate (Mattes and Richmond 2015: 12; Resnick and Casale 2011, 15; Biney and Amoateng 2019, 12; Tambe and Kopacheva 2023). Turnout at the polls increases with age.

Life cycle factors
Literature also posits that life cycle factors can also be used to explain youth political

participation (Gray and Caul 2000, 1094; Tiley and Hobolt 2011; Erkulwater 2012, 202; Smets 2016, 226). Young people face various obstacles when it comes to securing employment, acquiring a house or property, and establishing a family. These challenges contribute to a diminished interest in political engagement in comparison to older individuals who have already settled into their lives (Smets and Van Ham 2013, 350; Smets 2016, 226). Research has shown that having a job and being married positively impact one's chances of participating in electoral activities.

Gender

Studies that have established a negative correlation between being a young woman and political participation (in all forms) are mostly in developing democracies (Amoateng et al. 2014, 5905; Ennaji 2016; Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi 2016; Zvobgo and Dziva 2017, 63). African women are less likely to vote, contact government officials, and attend rallies and community meetings (Bratton et al. 2005, 164-165). In a study on gender gaps and political participation in Sub-Saharan Africa, Coffe and Bolzendahl (2011, 253) note that in 10 of the 18 nations that were included in their study, women were less likely to register to vote.

Education

In developing democracies, scholarship asserts that education has a positive influence on the voter turnout of young people (Pellicer et al. 2022, 196). For example, a study conducted by Kuenzi and Lambright (2010, 784) aimed at identifying the determinants of voting behavior in 10 African nations revealed a positive correlation between education and voting. Similarly, another study encompassing eight countries in Africa in 2016, conducted by the Mandela Institute for Development Studies (MINDS) (2016, 63), shed light on the fact that African youth with higher educational attainment were more inclined to participate in elections.

Low political efficacy

The decline in young people's involvement in electoral politics has also been ascribed to low political efficacy. In this particular context, political efficacy is defined as an individual's assessment of their government's receptiveness towards the needs and aspirations of its citizens (Lee 2006, 416). As such, political efficacy becomes contingent upon one's personal capability or incapability to elicit a reaction from the political system. Youth in Africa are increasingly dissatisfied with conventional politics, they have

no faith in politicians, they feel alienated and neglected (see Mattes 2012,140; Booysen 2015, 36; Tracey 2016, 31; Zvaita and Tshuma 2019, 28).

2.4 Meso level factors

Family socialisation

In studying political socialisation, the family unit has been a point of attention with some scholars putting it that behaviour and attitudes in adult life can be traced back to the process of family socialisation (Jennings et al. 2009, 786; Plutzer 2002, 54; Roman and Esau 2015; Esau 2018, 13). Households provide what Zuckerman et al. (2005, 93) refer to as "the primary locus of affection, trust, comradeship and political discussion" for their members. Parents and guardians serve as examples when they engage in the political sphere, exercising their right to vote, endorsing a petition, or contributing funds. Consequently, their children may imitate these activities as they come of voting age. Conversely, family socialisation can also deter political participation if children are socialised by their parents not to participate in politics—for example, the case of rural youth in Botswana (Ntau and Ntsabane 2006).

Peer pressure

Just like the family unit, peer pressure is another mobilising factor that can positively influence the political engagement of young people. In the context of emerging democracies, such as South Africa, Amoateng (2015, 114) conducted a study that examined the impact of peer pressure on the political socialisation of university students at the University of Johannesburg. The study involved 1,214 participants, and the findings demonstrated a positive association between engaging in political discussions with peers and a student's awareness of political issues, which can indirectly stimulate political participation.

Moreover, the influence of peer pressure on youth political participation has become more evident in relation to the increasing use of social media. In 2010, Vitak et al. (2011) conducted a study in the United States involving 4,000 undergraduate students at Midwestern University. The aim of the study was to explore how the use of Facebook influenced the political engagement of students during the 2008 United States presidential election. The findings indicated that exposure to the political activities of Facebook friends had a positive relationship with political participation (Vitak et al. 2011, 112). In another study conducted by Diehl et al. (2015, 1886) in the

United States between 2013 and 2014, it was found that the political content shared by esteemed peers on social media has the potential to influence the political opinions of young people.

Trade union pressure

There exists a longstanding association between trade unions and politics. Specifically, engaging in trade union activities increases the probability of voting in an election. According to Schur (2003, 766), participation in union activities raises one's chances of voting by one-third. Similarly, in Africa, research findings indicate a positive correlation between trade unionism and political participation. This correlation extends from the era of the resistance against colonial domination to the current struggles for democracy (Adman 2008, 130; Beckman et al. 2010; Karreth 2018, 159). For instance, survey data encompassing over 22,000 respondents from across Africa reveal that individuals who belong to trade unions display greater political engagement compared to non-members. They participate more frequently in elections and are more inclined to engage in protests and demonstrations (Karreth 2018, 159). Unfortunately, due to high unemployment rates prevalent in many African countries, particularly affecting the youth, the ability of trade unions to mobilise young people for political activities becomes restricted.

2.5 Macro-level factors affecting political participation

Democratic culture

The level of inclusivity in a political system, encompassing democratic, pluralistic, and open elements, is directly proportional to the degree of engagement from both the youth and the general public in both formal and non-formal political activities (Gabriel 2004, 367; Nilsson 2005, 1; Gundelach 1998, 436). The correlation between a democratic culture and political participation is positive. Should there be a lack of avenues for citizens to express their grievances and a denial of their right to voice dissenting opinions, the involvement of the youth in formal politics diminishes (Tracey 2016, 30-31). In a comprehensive examination of youth political participation across 19 African nations, Resnick and Casale (2011, 17) contend that dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy within their respective countries leads to decreased voting rates among the youth, particularly in urban areas. Similar findings have been observed in previous studies carried out on youth voter turnout in countries like Egypt and Morrocco (Sika 2012, 191; Desrues and Kirhlani 2013, 761).

Electoral systems

The electoral system used in a country tends to play a role in voter turnout. Findings from comparative survey studies posit that democracies with proportional representation (PR) systems tend to have a higher voter turnout as compared to those with majoritarian systems (Blais and Carty 1990, 178; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998, 251). Milner (2009, 14) made a specific observation that in Western European countries that employ a proportional representation system, the average rate of youth participation in voting was 12% higher compared to countries utilising majoritarian and mixed systems. In the remaining regions of Europe, not only does the youth populace exhibit a greater propensity to partake in voting, but the likelihood of their attainment of political office is also 15-20 times greater than that of plural systems and twice as much as that of nations with hybrid systems (Krook 2016, 14).

Whilst the majoritarian or First Past the Post (FPTP) has the potential to discourage specific identity groups, particularly minorities, research conducted by Lockwood and Kronke (2020, 2) revealed that FPTP can also stimulate an alternative form of traditional political engagement, namely, the act of recognising and reaching out to a councillor and legislator. Analysis of data gathered from 20 African nations in the years 2008 and 2009 demonstrates that nearly 60% of respondents within FPTP systems accurately identified with local leaders, in contrast to a mere 21% within PR systems.

Patron-client politics and corruption

Patron-client politics and corruption has a dual influence on the political participation of citizens. Patron-client relations are regularly underscored by the transaction of physical resources, services, and goods between a patron (politician in this case) and a client (voter) and these may be in the form of money, food, or clothing (Bratton 2008, 624). Bratton (2008, 621) puts it that at times elections in Africa are reduced to defining who gets access to the resources of the state, with politicians resorting to a number of means to attain office (fair or foul). The utilisation of a patron-client relationship is one of the unorthodox means. In one study conducted in Nigeria post the 2007 general elections, Bratton (2008, 623) revealed that one in five Nigerians were personally exposed to vote buying. The effect is more profound in rural settings. Survey data in Kenya drawn from the 2002 elections show that vote buying was a significant force that affected voter turnout and increased the probability of voting by 10% (Kramon 2009, 11).

In another study, Booysen (2015) conducted a survey which sought to establish South African youth interest in politics and participation. Part of the findings show

that young people in South Africa are generally cynical with electoral politics. Those who vote do so because "registering as voters and voting are two of the very few tools they have to try and secure jobs". Some youth vote because their perception is that by doing so they get connected to politicians who in turn can assist them in getting a job (Booysen 2015, 31). Thus, their motivation to vote is partly transactional.

Party structures

The manner in which political parties are structured also has an effect in the way that youth participate in party events and, eventually, how they participate in national politics (Dalton 2002, 28; Sloam and Henn 2019, 47). The decline in youth affiliation with political parties in advanced democracies is partly attributable to the decline in youth turnout at the polls (Van Biezen et al. 2012, 42). The exclusionary and elitist manner in which African political parties are structured is a challenge. Kanyadudi (2010, 1) observes that youth wings of some political parties in Africa are mostly redundant and not worthwhile at a time when there are several competing sources for the commitment of youth. Relatedly, Kabwato (2013, 19) notes that youth in Africa, especially young women, perceive conventional politics to be the realm of older people. Young Africans shy away from the ballot because they are excluded from positions of political authority in political parties and in government. "The social construction of maturity, that is, who is deemed responsible or capable, shapes eligibility for decision making offices, often to the exclusion of the youth, who are considered too young, irrational or irresponsible" (Biney and Amoateng 2019, 13).

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources entailed selecting respondents who provided their first-hand political experiences in focus groups. A total of 10 focus group discussions consisting of between 10 and 15 members were conducted, with five focus groups being conducted in Harare, and another five in Bulawayo. In total, 115 youth of voting age—that is, 18-23 years—were selected for this study (these fit within the Ama 2000 bracket). In the selection of participants, we ensured diversity in terms of gender, socioeconomic background, and level of political engagement. This helped to capture a range of perspectives and experiences that enriched the discussions. By engaging in a structured and facilitated conversation, the researcher gained insights into the perspectives, opinions, and experiences of youth regarding their

political engagement. On the other hand, secondary sources comprised of scholarship on youth political participation which largely consisted of books and journal articles.

4. Findings and Discussion

The primary objective of the focus groups was to determine the extent of youth involvement in the 2023 harmonised elections and identify the factors that either encourage or deter their participation. Based on the ensuing findings, it is evident that the youth in Harare and Bulawayo, referred to as 'Ama 2000', are not entirely active participants in electoral procedures, yet they are not completely disengaged either.

4.1 Voting

Findings from the study show mixed reactions with regards to turnout at the 2023 ballot. For those that decided to vote, their decision can be attributed to several factors—namely, their political awareness, desire for change, education, and inspiration from global political movements. Some of the 'Ama 2000' recognise the importance of voting as a means to address the challenges they face and create a better future for themselves and their communities. Their participation not only demonstrates their commitment to democratic principles but also reflects their determination to shape the destiny of Zimbabwe.

Political knowledge and interest
First, a notable number of the youth that participated in the discussions demonstrated they are politically conscious and engaged. 'Ama 2000' have grown up in an era of social media and instant information, which has allowed them to stay informed about political issues and developments in their country (Maringira and Gukurume 2021, 255). This increased awareness has empowered them to take an active role in shaping the future of Zimbabwe through their vote.

> I was always on social media and l was able to get information on the candidates that were contesting in my constituency (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).
> I follow Bobby Wine, Julius Malema, and Kalimbwe in Zambia on Twitter. These young guys inspire me and l felt as a young person in Zimbabwe the least l could do is to go and vote (respondent Harare focus groups).

Additionally, access to information and resources on social media allowed youth to critically analyse the political landscape and make informed decisions. This increased awareness made them realise the importance of participating in the democratic process and exercising their right to vote. They understood that their vote can make a difference, and that it is their responsibility as citizens to actively engage in the democratic process.

> I have gotten to understand that it is my democratic right to vote, and l had to exercise it even though it appeared the system did not want us to vote (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

Exercise of constitutional rights

'Ama 2000' see voting as a way to express their discontent with the current state of affairs and demand accountability from their leaders. By actively participating in the 2023 electoral process, they were able to voice their concerns and contribute to shaping the future of Zimbabwe.

> As youth we had to go and vote because we are not happy with the present leaders who have failed to improve the economy and are corrupt. So we voted for change. The results were, however, disappointing (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups). I have the right to vote just like everyone else. I should determine my own future through the vote. That is why l voted (respondent, Harare focus groups).

Socioeconomic factors as a motivating factor

Furthermore, the younger generation in Zimbabwe is facing a multitude of challenges and issues that directly affect their lives. High unemployment rates, lack of economic opportunities, and limited access to quality education are just a few of the problems they are confronted with on a daily basis (Moyo 2023). By participating in the electoral process, the younger youth saw an opportunity to elect leaders who they felt could address these issues and bring about positive change. They believe that, by voting, they can have a say in shaping policies that will improve their lives and create a better future for themselves and their communities.

> I have suffered enough, so I felt by voting I might be able to change things

(respondent, Bulawayo focus group). I had to go and vote as I feel that's the only way we can get a government that can create jobs for us (respondent, Harare focus groups).

It is also important to highlight the several reasons highlighted that explained why some of the youth in Zimbabwe did not vote, and it is important to explore these factors in order to address the youth voter apathy trend that dates back to previous elections. The disillusionment with the political system, economic challenges, poor management of elections, and distrust towards political institutions all contributed to the reluctance of some of the participants to vote.

Disillusionment with politicians

One major reason highlighted is the youth's disillusionment with politicians and the political system. Some of the youth felt that their voices are not being heard and that their concerns are not being taken seriously by the politicians. As noted in the literature (See Alphonso, Conway and Damico 2000; Brady et al 2020), the feeling of disenfranchisement and exclusion significantly explains youth apathy at the polls. This feeling of powerlessness and apathy towards the political system led them to believe that voting will not make a difference in their lives. As a result, they chose not to participate in the 2023 elections which they perceived as ineffective and unresponsive.

There is no point in participating in a process which serves to elect old people that do not care about our interests (respondent, Harare focus groups). You always hear these guys always saying 'nyika inotongwa nevene vayo' (the country is ruled by its owners); we are not 'vene' (owners) therefore there is nothing for us in this whole thing. So why waste my time (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

Moreover, there is a deep-rooted distrust towards political institutions and leaders among some of the youth in Zimbabwe. The country has a history of political corruption and abuse of power which has eroded the trust of youth in the political system (Nyoni 2017, 289; Ndlovu and Santos 2022, 394). They view politicians as self-serving individuals who do not have their best interests at heart. This lack of trust further discouraged some of them from engaging in the 2023 electoral process, as they believe that their votes will not bring about any real change.

We all saw the Gold Mafia scandal on YouTube, no one has been arrested to date and then you think voting will change these corrupt leaders. No (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups). Politicians in this country are corrupt. They want to be elected so as not to serve anyone except to line their pockets. Elections are all about enriching politicians (respondent, Harare focus groups).

Socio-economic factors as a depressing factor

Another reason for the lack of youth voting in Zimbabwe is the economic challenges that they face. As already noted, unemployment rates among the youth are high, making it difficult for them to prioritise voting over their immediate economic needs. With limited job opportunities and a struggling economy, it would appear youth in Zimbabwe are more focused on survival rather than engaging in politics. This economic instability acts as a barrier for them to actively participate in the electoral process.

I am busy with my nurse aide training. Once I am done I want to go to the UK like most people are doing where I can live a better life (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups). I have no time for elections, they do not bring money on the table. I have to hustle (respondent, Harare focus groups).

Alleged vote rigging

In Zimbabwe, the belief that elections are rigged is a commonly held belief among the youth. There are several reasons why youth in Zimbabwe think this way. First, there is a general lack of confidence in the electoral process due to past experiences of election irregularities and manipulation (See Chigora and Nciizah 2008; Mwonzora and Mwandikwaza 2019, 1130; and Ncube 2022, 150). The country has a long history of disputed elections, with allegations of voter intimidation, ballot tampering, and biased media coverage.

Look, whether we vote or not the results are always the same (respondent, Harare focus groups). I don't think that elections work in Zimbabwe. I don't have any evidence but I feel elections are somehow rigged (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups). I will be honest to say elections are rigged. I was actually vindicated we all saw what happened in Harare, people failed to vote and some voted at night (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

The stated reasons have created a sense of scepticism and mistrust among some of the youth, who felt that their votes will not make a difference and that the outcome of the election had already been predetermined.

Patron-client politics

The influence of political elites and patronage networks in Zimbabwe further strengthens the perception that elections are rigged. 'Ama 2000' accused the ruling party of having a strong grip on power and also using state resources and institutions to maintain dominance. The youth have witnessed how political elites use their positions to accumulate wealth and benefits for themselves and their supporters, while ordinary citizens continue to struggle.

> It's all about creating networks where family and friends can 'eat' (respondent, Harare focus groups). 'Bayadla bodwa' (they are eating alone) (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

The aforementioned creates a sense of unfairness and inequality, leading youth to question the legitimacy of the electoral process.

Violence

Zimbabwe has a long history of political unrest and violence, particularly during election periods (Sachikonye 2011; Macheka 2022; Kwashirai 2023). From the discussions it is clear that they have seen the consequences of political violence first-hand, such as loss of life, destruction of property, and displacement of communities. As a result, they are acutely aware of the potential dangers associated with elections and are concerned about their own safety and the stability of their country.

> I saw what happened after the 2018 elections. People were killed in Harare. So I cannot associate myself with such activities. It's better to keep away from politics and preserve your life than try to be a hero and get killed (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups). Elections in Zimbabwe are scary. There is always violence, so I am scared. I am a young mother and still want to fend for my young family (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

Social media has also played a role in shaping the youth's thoughts on elections and political violence. Zimbabwe's youth are increasingly connected to the world through social media

platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. They have access to information, news, and opinions from various sources, both within Zimbabwe and internationally.

> I have seen cases of people being tortured on YouTube for taking part in politics. It's scary, I would rather keep away (respondent, Harare focus groups).

This exposure allows them to gain different perspectives on elections and political violence, enabling them to form their own opinions based on a broader understanding of these issues.

4.2 Youth Voter Registration in Zimbabwe

In order to participate as a voter in Zimbabwe, Section 23 of Zimbabwe's Electoral Act makes it mandatory that one must be registered (Electoral Amendment Act 2023). Respondents were asked whether they were registered as voters. Close to half of the respondents in all the focus groups indicated that they were not registered to vote. The unimpressive voter registration rates among 'Ama 2000' in Zimbabwe is attributed to several factors discussed below, some of which have already been discussed in the preceding section on voting. These include a lack of trust in the political system, apathy and disconnection from politics, practical barriers to registration, cultural and societal factors, and a lack of awareness and understanding about the importance of voting.

Logistical challenges

One important reason not discussed before which explains why some of the youth are not registered relates to practical barriers such as logistical challenges and limited access to voter registration centres. In Harare and Bulawayo, where a significant portion of the population resides, there was a lack of convenient and accessible registration centres in the pre-election period (registration was done at the headquarters of the electoral management body—Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)). This made it difficult for youth living in these areas to register to vote, especially the challenge of not having reliable transportation and with some unaware of the nearest registration centre.

> For me to register I had to go to Famona. That means spending R40.00 on transport costs alone. Then when you get there, you are told you don't have this, or that. That's why I never bothered to go and vote (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

Related to this matter, an additional difficulty that arose from the conversations, predominantly impacting youth who recently attained the age of 18, is not having national identification cards. It is a prerequisite that one must have a national identity document before they register as a voter. Identification cards are issued by the department of the Registrar General, who concurrently holds the duty of providing various other credentials such as passports, birth certificates, and death certificates.

> I failed to acquire a national identity card, therefore I could not register. When I attempted to get the ID, I was told that they did not have enough kits for producing the cards (respondent, Harare focus groups).

Studies show that there is a correlation between having friendly voter registration processes and higher voter turnout (See Ansolabehere and Konisky 2006; Neihesel and Burden 2012). It should be noted that efforts aimed at increasing youth voter registration rates were initiated by both government bodies and civil society organisations through various campaigns targeting communities. These initiatives aimed to educate youth about their civic rights and responsibilities while simplifying the registration process through mobile registration units or online platforms. However, the window period for mobile voter registration were rather short.

4.3 Attending political rallies

Although several of the participants were not registered to vote, it was crucial to ascertain whether they had participated in any political gatherings preceding the 2023 elections, or have intentions of doing so in the next elections. From the discussions it was clear that 'Ama 2000' are averse to attending political rallies. There are several factors that contribute to this phenomenon. These include fear of violence, a lack of trust in political leaders, a sense of disengagement from the political system, socioeconomic challenges, violence and intimidation, and a generation gap within politics.

Fear of violence

One prominent reason for not attending political rallies was the fear of violence and intimidation, and this was more pronounced with the female respondents. It was particularly evident that violence was a strong concern for those who are opposition sympathisers as shown in the observations below.

> We have heard stories about women being raped at 'bases', so it is not safe for me as a young woman to be attending rallies. I am scared I might get violated (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups). I have seen on social media a number of rallies being disrupted by the police, getting arrested and so forth. Sadly, it is the ordinary people that get arrested, not the political leaders (respondent, Harare focus groups).

Socioeconomic factors

'Ama 2000' in Zimbabwe face significant socioeconomic challenges that hinder their participation in political activities such as rallies. Unemployment rates among youth are high, and many struggle to make ends meet. Additionally, the cost of attending these rallies, such as transportation and accommodation expenses, can be prohibitive for many youth who are already financially constrained.

> Attending rallies consumes a lot more time, which can be productively used to look for money (respondent, Harare focus groups). These rallies do not help us in any way. Other than getting a T-shirt and a box of Chicken Inn there is nothing more to it. I would rather spend my time looking for clients to plait (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

As has been observed, lifecycle challenges can serve as an impending factor when it comes to youth political participation (Erkulwater 2012). The same can be said of 'Ama 2000' in Zimbabwe. As a result, they prioritise finding work or engaging in income-generating activities over attending political rallies.

Lack of inclusivity within political parties

Another factor that contributed to the low attendance of youth at political rallies is the lack of engagement and inclusivity from political parties. Many youth expressed the feeling that their voices and concerns are not adequately represented within the political sphere. In an earlier study on the role of youth leagues in political parties, Kanyadudi (2010, 10) made similar findings of exclusionary politics within political parties. 'Ama 2000' perceive political parties as being disconnected from their realities and unresponsive to their needs. This lack of meaningful engagement discourages youth from actively participating in political events and reinforces their perception that their attendance would be inconsequential.

These parties only want us at their events so they can post pictures of crowds at stadia and then claim popularity, other than that they do not want us in their parties (respondent, Harare focus groups).

Gerontocracy

Relatedly, the dominance of older generations in politics was a factor that was strongly raised. This has been a challenge mostly within liberation movements in Africa (Adebayo 2018). In Zimbabwe, there is a significant generation gap between the older politicians who have been in power for decades and the younger generation.

'Chinhu chavo madhara aya', (its their thing these old people), they have even openly said 2030 'ndenge ndichipo' (I will be there) (respondent Harare focus groups). I though there would be renewal within the party ever since Mugabe left, but it looks like we have been sidelined again, so why should I attend functions of people that do not care about us (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

The lack of representation and inclusion of youth within political parties further exacerbates this gap. As a result, many youth feel alienated from the political processes and disengaged from attending rallies that are dominated by older politicians.

4.4 Party membership

Respondents were visibly averse to declare they were members of a party or a party's youth wing. Not one respondent confirmed party membership. In denying membership to political parties respondents raised numerous reasons for not being members. These include a lack of trust in the political establishment, a perception of disconnect between political parties and the concerns of youth, limited opportunities for meaningful engagement within parties, and a prevailing sense of apathy towards politics.

In Zimbabwe, there is a noticeable trend of youth not actively participating in political parties. 'Ama 2000' have grown up during a time of political turmoil and economic instability, which has eroded their faith in the ability of political parties to bring about positive change. They have witnessed years of corruption, nepotism, and failed promises from politicians, leading them to become disenchanted with the entire political system.

> Look, I do not trust politicians. When I was born, we did not have pipes water in Cowdray Park, now I am 19, we still do not have water. Why should I bother joining organisations that do not care about our welfare? (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

Another reason for the lack of youth membership in political parties is the perception that these parties are disconnected from the concerns and aspirations of the youth. As previously noted, dominant political parties in Zimbabwe are seen as being dominated by older politicians who do not understand or prioritise the issues that affect the youth, such as unemployment, access to quality education, and affordable housing. Youth feel that their voices are not being heard within these parties and that their concerns are being overlooked.

Moreover, the limited opportunities for meaningful engagement within political parties also contribute to the low youth participation. In Zimbabwe, political parties often have a hierarchical structure that makes it difficult for youth to rise through the ranks and have a significant impact on decision-making processes (Hodzi 2014, 57). This lack of upward mobility within parties discourages youth from actively joining and engaging with these organisations. Additionally, there is a perception that political parties in Zimbabwe are more focused on gaining and maintaining power rather than addressing the needs of the people. This further dissuades 'Ama 2000' from getting involved in party politics.

> Just take a peep at the ZANU PF Politburo and Central Committee then you tell me how many youth you will find there (respondent, Harare focus groups). The ruling party is for old people who fought against whites, while the opposition died with Morgan Tsvangirai. So really there is nothing for us (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

4.5 Donating money and time

The participants were asked whether they had contributed resources (money and time) to politicians and political parties. In a nation where 74% of the young population is without employment, it was unsurprising that the participants not only emphasised their financial constraints, but also indicated that even if they possessed the means or resources,

they would abstain from contributing to political organisations as they would receive no meaningful dividend both in the short and long term.

Zimbabwe is facing a challenging economic situation, with high levels of unemployment and limited job opportunities for youth. As a result, many youth struggle to make ends meet and prioritise their own financial stability over donating money to political parties. The limited financial resources available to them make it difficult for them to contribute financially to political causes.

> I am unemployed, so honestly, where would I get money to donate to a political party? (respondent, Harare focus groups) Things are tough in this country. There is no money. You may actually have noticed that people were attending ZANU PF rallies just to get the free two piecer meals and drinks, not because they love rallies (respondent, Harare focus groups).

There is also a sense of disillusionment and mistrust among the youth towards political parties in Zimbabwe. The country has a history of political corruption and instability, which has eroded the trust of many youth in the political system. They may feel that their donations would not be utilised for the betterment of society but rather for personal gain or to sustain a corrupt political establishment. This lack of trust acts as a barrier for youth engagement and involvement in political activities.

> If there is one party that displays affluence, it has to be ZANU PF. They buy all-terrain vehicles for their campaigns, so they have money which I wonder where they get it from if they cannot buy ambulances. Justify to me why I should donate money to such a party (respondent, Harare focus groups). I did a course in ethics where I got to learn that most of these politicians have been involved in corrupt deals from Willowvale scandal in the 1980s to the recent Gold Mafia scandal. There is no sane person who would donate money to such people (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

Moreover, the youth in Zimbabwe feel disengaged from the political process due to a perceived lack of representation and voice within political parties. Many youth felt that their opinions and concerns are not being heard or taken into account by established political parties. This lack of inclusivity and representation has led to apathy and a disinterest in contributing time and effort towards political parties.

4.6 Contact with local leaders

Respondents were also asked if they had been in contact with political leaders before and during the 2023 harmonised elections to raise specific matters of concern. Various reasons were raised as to why youth in Zimbabwe did not get in touch with political leaders during the 2023 electoral cycle. These include deep-rooted distrust, lack of representation, limited access to information, fear of repression, and a disconnect between generations.

As has already been noted, there is a lack of representation and inclusivity within the political sphere. The majority of political leaders in Zimbabwe are older individuals who do not fully understand or empathise with the issues and concerns of the youth. This creates a significant barrier for youth to feel heard and valued within the political system. As a result, 'Ama 2000' choose to disengage entirely, feeling as though their voices will not be taken seriously or considered.

Additionally, there is a fear of repression and retaliation from the government for speaking out against the status quo. Zimbabwe has a history of suppressing dissent and silencing opposition voices, which has created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation (Mutanda 2019; Dube 2021). Youth noted their reluctance to engage with political leaders out of concern for their safety and well-being.

> Getting in touch with a politician can get you in danger of either being beaten up by those of the opposing party or you may just disappear (respondent, Harare focus groups)

The advent of social media and technology has made it easier for people to connect. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp provide instant access to politicians and enable direct communication between citizens and politicians. This accessibility has empowered some youth to express their opinions, seek answers to their questions, and hold political leaders accountable for their actions or lack thereof. By utilising these platforms, a few of the youth in the study sought to engage with political leaders but faced challenges.

> There are too many accounts of political leaders especially on Facebook, so it is difficult to know which one is genuine and which one is fake (respondent, Harare focus groups). Some of the verified accounts are handled by other

> people and not the leaders themselves, so it is quite discouraging (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups). 'Mukomana' (nickname for Nelson Chamisa) is active on Twitter and has responded to one of my questions. The challenge is that he is too cryptic and avoids answering questions directly (respondent, Harare focus groups).

Another factor that contributes to the online disconnection between youth and political leaders is the digital divide prevailing in the country. Many youth in Zimbabwe do not have affordable and reliable access to the internet or other platforms where they can learn about political issues, engage in discussions, or connect with political leaders. This lack of access hampers their ability to stay informed and actively participate in political discourse.

> Data is just too expensive. With the little data I get, I would rather discuss business than politics (respondent, Harare focus groups). The monthly data that my parents buy for me is for research related activities only, if I get too excited and divert I will have only myself to blame if it gets exhausted mid-month or something (respondent, Bulawayo focus groups).

5. Conclusion

The study sought to investigate the electoral participation of 'Ama 2000' in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections. As noted, electoral participation involves a number of activities namely voting, attending political rallies, membership in political parties, donating money and time, and getting in touch with political leaders. Literature also identifies a number of factors that contribute to both the engagement and disengagement of youth in electoral processes, and these factors were classified into three categories namely micro, meso, and macro factors. From the findings, it can be argued that 'Ama 2000' are generally apathetic, as they only demonstrated some level of participation in voting, and not the rest of the other modes of electoral participation, where they are generally disengaged. The golden threads that run through in justifying their lack of interest in electoral politics are their disillusionment with politicians, gerontocracy, rigidity in political parties, politically motivated violence, and life cycle factors. From the micro level factors discussed, only life cycle factors partly explain the disengagement of 'Ama 2000' from the 2023 elections. Macro-level factors namely party structure, the political

environment, and elections management largely explain the apathy shown by the respondents. Meso level factors (family socialisation, peer, and trade union pressure) were hardly mentioned. However, 'Ama 2000' demonstration of political knowledge and interest plus the limited participation in voting demonstrate their commitment to democratic principles and also reflect their determination to shape the destiny of Zimbabwe, should there be the political will to address the other structural hindrances that stand in their way.

It is crucial for political parties to actively engage with the youth and to promote dialogue between politicians and young citizens to address the concerns of disillusionment. Addressing socioeconomic challenges and promoting inclusivity are essential steps towards encouraging youth participation in political activities and fostering a vibrant democratic society. Strengthening civic education programmes within schools to cultivate an informed electorate from an early age, establishing more accessible voter registration centres across all regions, and fostering transparent election monitoring systems can also bridge the apathy gap. By actively involving youth in the democratic process, Zimbabwe can build a solid foundation for inclusive governance, foster political stability, and ensure that the voices of its future leaders are heard.

Acknowledgements

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