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Understanding Voter Apathy in Zimbabwe.



**Commissioned By
Citizen in Action Southern
Africa.**

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Introduction

Zimbabwe is fresh from elections conducted on 26 March 2022. 28 House of Assembly seats and 122 local government vacancies were up for grabs in long awaited by elections which had been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. A voter turnout of 35% was recorded. The period January to March 2022, was characterized by interesting events and processes typical and atypical of by elections previously in Zimbabwe. First, the elections were to be the first to be conducted under COVID-19 regulations and restrictions. Second, having been a largely a result of recalls within the Movement for Democratic Change- Alliance, the by elections offered the first chance for voters to have a say in matter. Third, they were characterized by huge turnouts at rallies of the new Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC) and Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU PF). Lastly, the elections came on 26 March and left mixed feelings vis-a-vis the results, the voter turnout, the administration of the elections by ZEC and what this meant going forward and looking at 2023. These brief analyses these with a particular focus on voter turnout.



Voter apathy
– a common
phenomenon
or just a by-
elections
thing?

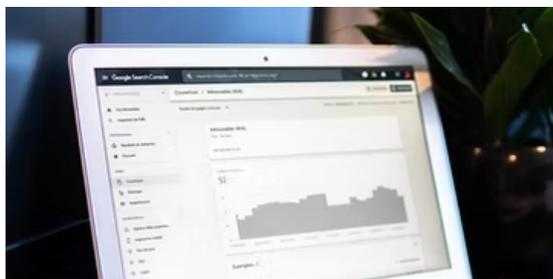
Voter apathy refers to individuals not voting in elections because they feel like their participation will not make a difference. Crewe et al (1992) distinguish between voter apathy and voter alienation as the basis of low political motivation. Apathy denotes a lack of feeling of personal responsibility, a passivity and indifference for political affairs. Subsequently, it denotes the absence of a feeling of personal obligation to participate. Voter alienation, on the other hand, denotes an active rejection of the political system and thus, political participation is negative towards the political world.

Ioannis Kolovos and Phil Harris (2002) argue that there are three schools of thought explaining voter turnout (Pattie and Johnston 1998, Bartle 2002): a) theories of rational choice, b) sociological theories and c) theories of political efficacy. Theories of rational choice argue that voters weigh up the costs and benefits of their actions. Thus, they will turn up to vote when they consider that the benefits of such an action outweigh the costs. Sociological theories argue that socio-economic characteristics affect political behaviour, identification with a party's values and people's propensity to vote.

In Zimbabwe turnout is higher among: i) those with lower income, ii) those of lower education, iii) blue-collar workers, iv) men, v) middle-aged and older voters, vii) those with closer community ties, viii) rural voters and ix) members of organizations. Social factors may influence turnout by limiting the access of voters to political information and may affect their party identification. Political efficacy theories argue that people alienated from the political process are less likely to vote. Alienated voters feel that their vote will not make any difference, that politics has little influence in their lives and that the main parties do not address their concerns.

There have been episodes of voter apathy in Zimbabwe elections since 1980. 1996 (31.7%), 2005 (47%) and 2008 (42.7%) are typically low voter turnout years in Zimbabwe election history. However, given that Zimbabwe has conducted nine (9) general elections since independence, it might be said that Zimbabwe is not a generally apathetic country when it comes to elections. By elections, however, have almost always been characterized by average to low voter turnout because the political stakes are considered to be low. The recent by elections were no exception despite the hype surrounding them for several reasons including the entrance of a new CCC party, the fact that they were a referendum on who is the most popular opposition party, the number of by-elections conducted on the same (so many wards and constituencies were up for grabs at the same time) due to COVID-19 setbacks and the attendance of the rallies prior to March 26.

Some statistics



28 house of assembly seats and 122 council seats were up for grabs in the just ended by election. CCC won 19 of the house of assembly seats while ZANU PF took 9 seats. In the local government elections, ZANU PF won 47 while CCC won 75 seats. The cumulative vote for the CCC is 129 799 and that of ZANU PF is 128 399 giving only 1400 as the difference. The statistics show that the rural voter is less apathetic, is more associated with the organization and community and likely to go and vote. ZANU PF had almost

equal votes to CCC in the popular vote but with much less constituencies.

An analysis of the voters' roll by the Election Resource Centre (ERC) revealed that "for 27 of the 28 constituencies with by-elections there is a net decrease in registrants. However, for Kwekwe Central there is a net increase in registrants of 1,470 (6.02%) on the 2022VR. On average for all 28 constituencies there is a net decrease of 1.36%". there is therefore no significant change to the numbers in comparison with 2018.

Effects of misinformation

Trust in the Zimbabwe Election Commission (ZEC) is at an all-time low (42%) as of the last afro-barometer of 2021. This is down from an all-time high of 48%. It is clear that Zimbabweans have little trust in the election management body and this in turn influences their decision to go and vote. Without trust of the election authorities, voting feels like a waste. However, there were active popular individuals and examples include the posting of ZEC official conducting pre-election activities as election fraud could have done harm to credibility and trust for ZEC. The continued online audit of the voters' roll by Team Pachedu revealed a lot of irregularities which ZEC disputed and or explained. True or not, the findings by the Team Pachedu did a lot to dampen any positive hopes for making a vote that actually counts.



Turned away voters

Reports from most observers and polling agents revealed that there were many prospective voters who were turned away because they had either registered after the cut-off date 8 January 2022, were not found in the voters' roll, and or their change of polling station, ward, or constituency had not been done by ZEC. This contributed to lower numbers.

Rally turnout is not equal to voter turnout

Huge turnout characterized the campaign rallies of both the CCC and ZANU PF. However, this did not culminate in equal voter turnout. Political parties tended to implement star rallies as opposed to localized campaigns. This meant that the big numbers in the different venues did not mean the people were from that same constituency. Furthermore, rallies are attended by all sorts of people, including unregistered, below 18 and even non-members of the political organizations.

The nature of by-elections

By elections by nature are not game changing in Zimbabwe. For example, even if CCC had won 100 percent of the seats in parliament and councils, there was still going to be no change in terms of the configuration of governance in Zimbabwe. ZANU PF was still going to be controlling a two thirds majority in parliament. While the march 26 elections seemed to offer that edge in that they were many at once, and characterized by new CCC and MDC-A, in the end, they ended up just like any other by-election. Voters do not see possible immediate change from the elections and are therefore not compelled to vote.



Apathy among the youth

It is noteworthy that most of the turned away voters in the by election were young first-time voters who registered after the cut-off date. However, in general, young voters are largely uncompelled to take part in elections. They see no particular immediate gain to their situation, be it unemployment, education and poverty among other this. Capturing the young requires strategic targeted campaign which convince the youth of the viability of their vote.

The Way Forward



1. Voter education

On January 7, ZEC approved 76 CSOs to conduct voter education in the respected by-election wards and constituencies. This serves to inform citizens on what is required for one to vote in the by elections. It also serves to inform citizens on the impending by elections thereby having a mobilization effect. If done properly, voter education can influence citizens to prepare for elections and eventually vote.

2. Voter mobilisation

Innovative voter mobilization techniques to ensure citizens are registered to vote and eventually cast their vote. With an economy as in Zimbabwe, economic incentives might prove to be game changing for the young to middle aged urban voter.

3. Localised campaigns

The by elections witnessed high level rallies characterized by bussing and attendance by all senior party officials and campaign leads. Localized campaigns took back stage to the fly-by mega rallies. Where localized campaign by candidates and their teams was strong as in Kwekwe Central, Epworth and Binga North better turnouts were noticed. These findings support the rational choice theory: those interested in the election or felt closer to a party would consider its 'cost' bearable and would vote. The postulation also provides some support to political efficacy theory as those with a greater commitment and interest in politics were more likely to vote as local party campaigning had an influence on turnout.”

4. Declining party identification

Identification or membership in political parties has declined significantly in Zimbabwe especially with exit of former presidents Robert Mugabe of ZANU PF and Morgan Tsvangirai of MDC. The two commanded organic followership and membership to their organization which in turn influenced natural voter interest.

5. Proportional representation (PR)

PR is believed to stimulate turnout, as any party can achieve (or increase) its representation in the legislature proportionally to its share of the vote (Dalton, 1988)

6. Compulsory voting

Another proposal for the tackling of low turnout is to make voting compulsory

7. Voting Methods

New methods of voting (such as postal and electronic voting) are likely not to disenfranchise voters as they can vote comfortably in their areas of work or station.

Conclusion

Voter apathy is an emerging worldwide phenomenon and should be scrutinized further for better results. However, by elections are by nature not very compelling for voters as they hardly change much of the status quo.

CITIZEN IN ACTION SOUTHERN AFRICA



Citizen in Action Southern Africa (CIASA) is a registered apolitical and citizen's rights focused organisation established by a group of young human rights defenders and activists coming together to defend, promote and empower marginalised and disenfranchised community groups in its diversity to fully enjoy their rights. The organisation was registered in 2020 as a Trust. The **CIASA** formation was meant to tackle important issues at a scale where it can achieve significant and measurable impacts. The **CIASA** was formed after the realisation that marginalised community groups are being left behind in the empowerment, democracy and governance, and national development discourses of several Southern African countries owing to lack of specific targeted interventions and investments for vulnerable groups particularly youth and women. The team who established **CIASA** also recognised the solidarity and movement building crisis ailing countries in addressing national crisis especially lack of proper democratic and economic governance interventions targeting diverse youth and, women and girls in marginal setups such as hard-to-reach rural areas, resettlements and other economically excluded areas. **CIASA** was established immediately to provide oversight and think tanking around the welfare and rights of marginalised groups with a sole purpose of ensuring progressive realisation and enjoyment of rights by all. The organisation work with citizens in low living standards where social harmony for marginalised women is threatened. Access to basic social services such as water and sanitation, health and education have turned out from being a right into a privilege in both rural and urban areas. **CIASA** is therefore influencing the policies as it relates to the rights of women and girls in their diversity and advance the rights-based and pro-people approach to political, social and economic empowerment through well-thought citizens or community-driven and led reforms premised under the principles of transparency, accountability, democracy and good governance. The organisation is there to create and facilitate space for citizens and communities to have a collective voice to challenge oppressive systems and structural barriers and in turn effectively participate in key decision making processes across the cultural, political, social, environmental, technological and economic spectrum. **CIASA** communicates and measure its results based on its theory of change framework which seeks to defend, promote and empower citizens in all spheres of life.



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