

## Research Article

# VOTING BEHAVIOR AMONGST GRADUATE YOUTHS DURING ZIMBABWE'S 2023 HARMONIZED ELECTIONS AN ANALYSIS

<sup>1</sup>, \*Francis Maushe, <sup>2</sup>Dr. D. Mahuku B, <sup>3</sup>Tatenda Aneni Gambiza

<sup>1</sup>Social work lecturer, Midlands State University - School of Social Work, University in Harare, Zimbabwe.

<sup>2</sup>Governance lecturer, Bindura University of Science Education, University in Bindura, Zimbabwe.

<sup>3</sup>Social work lecturer, Bindura University of Science Education, University in Bindura, Zimbabwe.

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### ABSTRACT

The study analyzed voting behavior among graduate youths during Zimbabwe's 2023 harmonized elections. The Youth Development Model that was developed by the Zimbabwe National Association of Youth Organizations (NAYO) informed the study. The study was purely qualitative with an interpretivist philosophy. The population of the study were graduate youths who belonged to a WhatsApp group named BUSE SW Alumni former Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) Graduates. The group was made up of about 447 participants. A focus group discussion schedule was used to spearhead a discussion in the group. Data saturation was used to measure the generation of adequate qualitative data. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the findings. It imaged from the study that the majority of the graduate youths did not vote because they were not registered while some were turned away because their names were not in the voters' roll despite them having registered. Most of the graduate youths did not vote because they were frustrated with delays and spending time in long queues since ballot papers did not arrive in time. It was found that the majority of the graduate youths held positive attitudes toward the elections with the hope that regime change would liberate them. On the contrary, a few graduate youths were pessimistic about elections showing a loss of hope on the impact of elections in Zimbabwe. It was recommended that Graduate youths should be educated and empowered to embrace themselves in being participants in active politics take up influential decision-making positions and exercise their right to vote.

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe, Youth Organizations, Bindura University, Lack of interest, Lack of time.

### INTRODUCTION

Voting is a civic duty that individuals should exercise to choose the leaders they want who can represent the choices of the people. Participation in elections is vital because it is the only time that the citizens can hold the political elite accountable for their actions, competencies or incompetence. The Zimbabwean youths had a crucial role to play in the harmonised 2023 election because the youths between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five constitute the majority of eligible voters in the case that they register to vote. Notably graduate youths are assumed to have a better understanding of the right to vote because the outcome has a bearing in determining their future. Across the world, individuals who are above 18 years of age are entitled to vote in national or state elections. Fraga & Holbein (2020) argues that it is common that office bearers for the presidency, national assembly, and local authority among others should be elected through acquiring a popular vote. Youth votes are therefore very crucial since the graduate youths are perceived to have attained education that enables them to understand the essence of casting their votes depending on the political manifestos of those campaigning. Political freedom and development or it lack thereafter is determined by their participation or non-participation in elections.

Joshua (2013) states that voting is a foundational concept of the entire democratic structure in which a group of citizens collectively elect individuals who can represent them in government. Law & Flavin (2019) concluded in their study that voting is fundamental for the youth since they constitute a large number of a country's population. Leeper & Robison (2020) opines that the youth play a

significant role in determining the direction their country will take by exercising their rights through voting. Literature shows that the response of citizens especially the youths to choosing the candidates to fill political positions implies a lot for how a country will develop. This was the case with Zimbabwe in 1980 explaining why the Zimbabwean government under Prime Minister Robert Mugabe adopted education policies that mainly benefitted the youths.

Historically, youths have always been active in governance and electoral processes in which most countries gained their independence based on youths' involvement. According to Law & Flavin (2019), most states in the developing world achieved transformation through the contribution of young people to national politics. A summary of Flanagan & Levine (2010) shows that youth participation is crucial because; youth participation is a right, youths are competent citizens, and participation addresses the issues they face. For example, key problems of the economy have a huge bearing on graduate youths. Unemployment is one of the biggest problems developing nations are facing of which Zimbabwe is not an exception.

As already noted in the foregoing voting allows citizens to address issues that directly affect them. Law & Flavin (2019) posit that major issues that affect citizens and paradoxically influence voter rational and decision-making include; education, healthcare, employment, housing, and presently environmental issues inter- alia. Voting enables the citizens to choose the leaders who can represent them at all levels be into local, provincial, and national level. Notably, the 2021 election in the USA as reported by Fabina (2021) has the highest youth turnout of 57% despite the existence of Covid-19 restrictions. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) (2023) states that youths' participation in politics can subsequently change the development of Zimbabwe given their numbers. On the contrary,

\*Corresponding Author: Francis Maushe,

<sup>1</sup>Social work lecturer, Midlands State University - School of Social Work, University in Harare, Zimbabwe.

the participation of the youths in elections has been noted to be shrinking as each election year passes probably because of pre- and post-election violence and brutalization in which the youths find themselves in. Fraga & Holdein (2020) state that despite the significance of youths' participation in politics and elections, these youths experience several challenges that militate against their participation and these include; fear of violence, lack of supportive mechanisms to promote youth involvement, lack of information, and lack of political will.

The participation of the youths in politics is informed by regional legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) Article 21 which states the "right to take part in the government of his country, directly or freely chosen representatives". Also, the African Youth Charter is another instrument that supports youth involvement in politics and Zimbabwe adopted the instrument. The Zimbabwean Constitution Section 20 provides an opportunity for the youths to actively participate in governance and electoral processes (ZESN, 2023).

Ahearn, Brand, & Zhou (2022) studied how youth voting in higher education increases voting. They conducted national longitudinal surveys of the youth in general and established that youths are likely to vote if there are pressing issues that affect their welfare. Ahearn *et al.*, (2022) found out that college-educated youths are more likely to vote as compared to those with less education. Arguably this may be because youths in colleges or universities have a better understanding of how mismanagement of economies affect them because they always look forward to living a descent life given their education status. Ahearn *et al.*, noted that an analysis of elections in the USA show that more graduate youths and college students participate in politics based on the economic returns they anticipate getting from the incumbent government or the those who want to come into power. Notably it emerged from their research that a large number of eligible voters in the United States prefer to stay home than to cast a vote resulting in 55-60% voter turnout. U.S. Bureau (2020) submit that level of educational is a major factor that determines one's participation in elections. For example, the U.S., Bureau of the Census (2020) revealed that college-educated students are 50% more likely to vote as compared to those who only have a high school diploma. This promulgates a strong nexus between college-goers, graduate youths and political participation.

The Higher Education Research Institute (2010) examined the voting behavior among the youth. The institute conducted surveys that were presented in their report that showed voting behavior among first-year students and final-year students in colleges in the USA. In the USA 2008 presidential election, voter turnout was 64%. The results presented showed that of the people who were eligible to vote, a higher turnout was amongst the youth. In line with the 2008 USA Presidential election, at least 3 out of 4 college students (1<sup>st</sup> years and final years) who were eligible to vote voted, supporting the fact that college students participate more in politics in comparison to other segments of the population. Smyton & McAndrew (2021) observed that voter turnout in Canada skyrocketed among college students in the 2020 Presidential elections. There was an increased voter turnout among college students that increased from 52% in 2016 to 64% in the 2020 elections. The major reasons for high voter turnout amongst college students were attributed to student activism against racial injustice, global climate change, and voter suppression coupled with educators' campaigns on students about the importance of voting. Based on the Canadian outcome, young college students participated more in the elections in comparison to other youths not in colleges or universities.

Mogaldi & Mlambo (2022) examined the demographic and systemic factors that affect student voter turnout in Africa. In line with this study, South African college and graduate students were reported to have low participation in local, provincial, and national elections. The unemployment rate among graduate youths was established to be one of the factors that determine the rate of participation in national elections. The AGA Khan University (2016) states that a survey report that was published in 2016 in Rwanda showed that the youthful population constituted 78% of Rwanda's population. Arguably this largest population segment should be the ones who must determine how Rwanda must be governed and develop in the future which can only happen through political participation (voting and being part of decision-makers). Unemployment in Rwanda was reported to be one of the key reasons that influence the youths in general to participate in politics resulting in higher voter turnout. For example, the survey showed that 83% of Rwandan youths participate in elections. In Zimbabwe, the youths (aged between 35 and 18 years) in line with the latest census statistics of 2022 by ZIMSTATS, show that youths constituted about 72% of the Zimbabwean population. The youths in Zimbabwe have the capacity of determining Zimbabwe's future by participating or not participating in elections.

The Carter Center (2023) observed the 2023 harmonized elections. As shown in ZEC's voters' roll, 43.5% (2 403 021) of the 2023 total voters were youths. Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN; 2023) contends that the effective participation of youths in the country's elections remains a cornerstone to enhanced civic engagement in politics. In line with the Election Guide Democracy Assistance and Election News (2023), voter turn-out for the total registered voters (6,619,690) only 45.67% turned out to vote. Graduate youths in Zimbabwe are faced with a plethora of challenges; unemployment is one of the most worrisome although drug abuse is another pertinent problem that determines their participation in voting to influence better leadership. Most graduate youths are leaving the country to seek employment in the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and other countries. Nuanced with the range of factors that affect graduate youths in Zimbabwe. This paper therefore assesses youth's voter turnout behavior in the August 2023 elections in Zimbabwe. determined a lot of implications.

### Youth Development Model (YDM)

This study was informed by the Youth Development Model (YDM) which is a comprehensive approach that works well in promoting various ways to enhance the lives of the youth through their participation in local, national, and regional processes. The model was developed by the Zimbabwe National Association of Youth Organizations (NAYO) and it was successfully adopted by the Southern Africa Youth Forum (SAYof) in 2018 (ZESN, 2023). The major tenets of this model are: promoting practical ways of developing youth leaders, stakeholders, and those individuals who advocate for change. YDM is premised on 7Ps that include; possibilities, prioritization, participation, partnerships, policies, and laws. These fundamental factors shape the involvement of the youth in processes that concern the development of solutions to major problems that affect the youth. This model is relevant to this study in that it deals and explains issues of unemployment, drug abuse, and limited space for political participation in which graduate youths' participation in politics can flatten the curve for this largest segment of the population. Therefore, the youths are considered stakeholders who can work towards their emancipation through participating in elections and politics.

## Problem Statement

The uncertainty of graduate youths' behavior in the harmonized August 2023 elections in Zimbabwe is a matter of concern in understanding the participation of youths in politics. The study is premised on the reasons behind low voter turnout among graduate youths since they constitute the largest population segment in Zimbabwe. Leeper & Robison (2020) argue that the youth play a fundamental role in changing the political narrative and change for a country through their participation in elections and decision-making. Barriers such as fear of being victimization, pre-election violence, and lack of education were observed by ZESN (2023) to be some of the drawbacks towards low voter turnout among the youths. On the contrary, the high unemployment rate in Zimbabwe and the worsening economic conditions are key factors that drive and influence the youths to vote especially the graduate youths. There is limited information about why the graduate youths behaved in the manner they did in the just-ended August 2023 Presidential elections in Zimbabwe. This study therefore examined graduate youths' behavior during the August 23-4 harmonised elections.

## Research questions

1. What factors determined voter turn-out amongst graduate youths in Zimbabwe's August 2023 harmonized elections?
2. What attitudes were held by the graduate youths towards voting in Zimbabwe's August 2023 harmonized elections?

## METHODOLOGY

The study was purely qualitative. The interpretivist philosophy was employed to generate in-depth variables and factors that are related to graduate youth behavior. Alharahsheh & Pius (2020) submit that interpretivism promotes the development of rich insights that can influence effective change for the needs of the youth. The target population of the study was a group of graduate youths from Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) who were involved in discussions in a WhatsApp group (BUSE SW Alumni). The group was made up of about 477 participants who were former university students who graduated from BUSE. Data was gathered through an online discussion in a WhatsApp group. The study used also used a focus group discussion method in which the researchers moderated the discussion. The responses that were given were recorded/captured from the group and they were used for the qualitative data analysis for this study. Cantelmi *et al.*, (2021) submits that online forums are an effective way of gathering the responses of study participants. Data saturation was used to ensure that the study generated adequate data that would answer the study questions. The discussion was repeatedly brought into the online group to ensure the topics were adequately covered to maximize data saturation. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to explore and interpret qualitative datasets about graduate youth voting behavior in the Zimbabwe August23-4 harmonized elections. In this regard, reflexive thematic analysis enabled the drawing of inferences based on the experiences that provided insights in line with the voting behavior among the graduate youths.

## FINDINGS

The findings of the study were generated using an online discussion forum (WhatsApp) group that contained youth in college and graduate college students who studied for a Social Work Degree. The onus of the study was to examine voting behavior among graduate youths in the August 23-4, 2023 harmonized elections in Zimbabwe. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed in analyzing the findings. The group

was made up of 477 participants in which the majority of them responded during the discussion until adequate data was generated. The study captured direct responses to support the presentation of findings in answering the research questions. Open-ended questions that were used promoted smooth-flowing in the online forum (WhatsApp) group since the discussion was repeatedly brought in the group to maximize gaining deep and adequate responses about voting behavior among graduate youths.

## Characteristics of the graduate youths who participated in the discussion

Graduate youths who participated in the online discussion were former Bindura University of Science Education students who studied Social Work in different years and graduated. During the discussions, it was noted that 85 out of 477 (18.5%) of the graduate youths were employed in direct social-work-related professions while 101 out of 477 (20.1%) were employed in jobs that were related to Social Work. The remaining 291 out of 477 (61%) were unemployed. A minority of these unemployed graduate social work students reported that they were self-employed while some were doing some freelance jobs online. The findings implied that the graduate youths were very concerned about experiencing change in the country given the high rate of unemployment in the country and the unavailability of social work-related jobs. In this regard, the unemployed graduate youths expressed high dissatisfaction in terms of employment related to their occupations and this helped the study to generate real contextual findings that were informed by the experiences of the graduate youths.

## Distribution of Voter turnout for the harmonized elections

The study participants all reside in Zimbabwe and voted in various constituencies of the country. It was established that 192 out of 477 (40%) of the graduate youths managed to vote in the harmonized elections from their respective places of residence. The remaining 285 out of 477 (60%) reported that they did not vote. The findings revealed that a huge chunk of votes from the graduate social work students was lost despite them being the largest population segment that is highly influential in influencing change in the political narrative. Notably, graduate youth's voter turn-out would have highly influenced positive change in line with the major problems that the graduate youths are experiencing in their daily lives since they graduated.

## Factors that determined voter-turn among graduate youths

The study solicited the reasons that prevented the graduate youths from voting in the August 23-4, 2023 harmonized elections. The findings that were obtained from the discussion were used as evidence in line with the themes for this reflexive thematic analysis. The table below shows the reasons that prevented the graduate youths from voting;

**Table 1: Reasons that prevented the youths from voting**

Reason for not voting
Not registered
Lack of interest
Frustration due to delayed voting (no ballot papers)
Fear of violence
People returned home in fear of moving at night
Some jobs did not allow people to be absent the whole day
Name not on voters' roll

**Source: BUSE SW Alumni WhatsApp Group**

## Not registered

The study established that some of the graduate youths who participated in the discussion did not vote because they were not registered. One of the graduate youths said;

*The registration process is manually done which makes it difficult for us to travel to those places leaving our workplaces. Instead, registration should be done online to make it easy for those who do not have time to travel to ZEC registration centers.*

*I did not register because I am aware that the elections would be rigged. I am fed up with Zimbabwe, and I am processing papers to leave the country to go for greener pastures in the UK (Graduate Youth 2)*

It was noted that a minority of the graduate youths were not registered based on various reasons. The use of manual/traditional registration processes by ZEC poses restrictions for some graduate youths who prefer to register online.

## Delays at polling stations (frustration)

Delays at polling stations were cited by the majority of the graduate youths who were registered to vote in urban areas especially major cities such as Harare, Bulawayo, Chipinge and Masvingo, among other cities and towns. It was reported by the majority of the group participants that countrywide ballot papers were not delivered in time making it frustrating for the voters who spent long hours in queues. The following responses were captured from the group;

*"Vamwe takangomirira, ballot papers haasati auya nanhasi takumbobva tozodzoka around 3"*

*[We are still waiting for the ballot papers from morning and it is now almost evening]*

*I came to vote without eating assuming it would take me less than 30 minutes until I got back home. I came again around 3pm but still ballot papers were not delivered. We hear that the situation is the same in Harare and Bulawayo. Some voters spent the night in queues to make sure that they cast their votes when ballot papers were delivered during the night and voted the next day when polling stations were opened.*

*This voting process was so frustrating because the environment was intimidating. I returned home without voting because some personnel who I am sure works for the central intelligence department (CIO) and those of Forever Zimbabwe (FAZ) were harassing and intimidating voters, this traumatized me.*

Another respondent said:

*I could not wait for the ballot papers since evening because I live in a rural area and it was going to be a challenge to travel back home at night. I was supposed to walk about 5km on foot and could not wait until late hours.*

The findings show that the majority of the graduate youths were exposed to frustrating situations that prevented them from voting. Major delays were experienced in most polling stations, particularly in cities and this affected the graduate youths who wanted to exercise their right to vote. They could not bear stand for long hours waiting for the ballot papers. Arguably it is evident that many of the graduate

youths failed to cast their votes because of ZEC's delays in distributing the ballot papers before voting time started.

## Lack of interest

A few participants in the group indicated that they lacked interest in exercising their right to vote in the harmonized elections. It was found out that the lack of interest was sparked by the state of politics in Zimbabwe in which the graduate youths have lost hope in the credibility of the process of conducting elections. One of the graduate youths remarked;

*I wouldn't want to waste my vote because the ruling party will always win despite not being voted for. Evidenced by previous elections our votes have been wasted, I just wish I find money to process my papers migrate to the UK, and leave this country.*

*Elections in Zimbabwe do not represent the will of the people. We know that the opposition won the 2008 elections and the 2018 elections but the elections were rigged. I would rather do my hustle than waste my time and lose customers casting a vote that does not work. This game is already played by ZANU.*

It is evident that the responses from the graduate youths have lost hope in national politics and participating in elections is no longer a priority for them given the past decades of alleged stolen elections. Therefore, the graduate youths are no longer interested in changing the political and economic narrative through their right to vote.

## Fear of election violence

A good number of the graduate youths revealed that they did not vote because they were frightened to be involved in violent actions as is a characteristic in harmonized elections in Zimbabwe. It was found out that some graduate youths even feared being near polling stations in fear of being victimized based on stories that Forever Associates of Zimbabwe (FAZ) representatives were intimidating people and instructing them where to cast their vote. This was shown in one of the graduate youths who said that;

*I could go even near the polling stations despite being a registered voter because some years back I was a victim of political violence so I would want to expose myself since people spent long hours in queues. It is a common thing that people can fight and get beaten in political activities. Zimbabwe has recorded a lot of violent activities during elections with some people dying, for example, a CCC activist Tinashe Chitsungo who was stoned to death in Harare.*

*I could not go to vote because graduate youths in my youth were stigmatized to be sellouts who voted for opposition parties. I did not want to get myself victimized by ZANU PF youths.*

Victimization was found in the study to have prevented the graduate youths from exercising their right to vote. It was highlighted that some members of the communities were intimidating voters to vote for the ruling party.

## Lack of time

Lack of time was also another factor that prevented the graduate youths from going to polling stations to vote. It was found out that

most of the graduate youths who are not employed preferred to hustle and make money than join the queues to vote.

*I only got a single day off from work to go and vote. Ballot papers did not arrive until the following day. I did not have time to vote the following day. Because I had to go back to work. Also, if you live from hand to mouth like most of the urban folk, a second day in the queue may mean certain starvation.*

*I failed to get to the polling station because there was not one to leave at my shop though there were no delays in the area where I live. People voted freely without challenges but I could not close my shop to join the queue.*

The findings showed that some of the self-employed graduate youths could not leave their hustles to vote. It was also noted that they believed that voting would not bring any positive change to their lives since the election was already predetermined.

### **Name not on voters' roll**

About 27 out of 447 (6%) of the graduate youths reported that they went to vote and joined the queues only to be told that their names were not on the voters' roll. The graduate youths complained that they had been denied their right to cast their votes despite having confirmed their names in the voter's roll during the voter education period. One of the graduate youths said;

*I got into a strong argument with a polling officer on the voting day about why my name was not on the voters' roll at the polling station. Surprisingly, I confirmed my details using the USSD Code but the name was not on the voters' roll. The ruling Zanu-PF government is aware that we the youths are frustrated by the way they are ruling and failing to create employment so logically most of the youths would vote for the opposition. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of youths' names were not on the voters' roll. Being deprived of voting was one of the issues that made me angry.*

The graduate youths opined that missing names on the voter roll was a technique to sideline the voice of the youths that could change the Zimbabwean narrative. The findings show that the graduate youths' political space is closed and limited resulting in the discrimination of graduate youths on technical grounds. Thus, graduate youths were disadvantaged based on technical errors.

### **Reasons for voting**

The study solicited the reasons that influenced the graduate youth to cast their votes. It was established that the majority of the graduate youths anticipated that voting for the main opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) would promote the needed regime change in which positive economic gains could be established. One of the graduate youths highlighted that;

*We spent years studying Social Work with the hope that we were going to secure high-paying jobs but this is not happening. We have resorted to vending and strongly believe that voting for CCC will change this situation and create employment opportunities for us.*

*We wanted to vote so that we choose a leader who represent our interests and priorities. Those electable ones whom we can approach anytime possible to air our*

*concerns so that they represent us at the local authority, national assembly, and presidential level. I was so excited to cast my vote and wished to see a new government coming through my vote.*

The responses that were given by the participants showed that they were optimistic about positive change in the country by casting their vote based on the election campaign promises. It was noted that participants believed that if the opposition party won the election there would be an improvement of key issues that affect the graduate youths in local communities.

### **Attitudes held by the graduate youths toward voting**

The study also noted the attitudes that were held by the graduate youths toward the 2023 harmonized elections. On one hand the majority of the graduate youths highlighted that they have positive attitudes about the possibility of these elections to change the economic situation in Zimbabwe. On the other hand, a few participants reported that they held negative attitudes about the elections based on the argument that elections cannot change anything in Zimbabwe but worsen the economic situation. One of the graduate youths highlighted that:

*I hope this time around the elections will liberate us from the long-term suffering we have been in. The majority of Zimbabweans are now tired of the ruling party and government and hope to vote in a new regime that would end the dilapidated state of Zimbabwe and address major challenges such as unemployment, currency crisis, poverty, drug abuse, and corruption among other problems.*

Another participant also said:

*I have given up on elections in Zimbabwe. It's just a waste of time and resources. I don't see regime change happening in Zimbabwe through the ballot... elections are just a formality. However, issues of unemployment and poverty are not a problem to me, I have learnt to hustle and survive on my own. I can't waste my time voting under the control of ZEC which is infiltrated. A rotten election system can't deliver credible results.*

The findings showed that the majority of the graduate youths had high hopes that elections would bring in a new regime. They strongly believe that the current Zanu-PF government and party have failed to meet the demands of the graduate youths and many disgruntled citizens. The graduate youths also contend that elections will not usher in a new regime in Zimbabwe.

## **DISCUSSION**

The major findings of the study were interpreted and discussed in line with the existing literature. The discussion was based on the key themes of the study that were derived from the research questions. Similarities and gaps in the literature are identified and discussed in this section.

### **Factors that determined voter-turn among graduate youths**

The study established that a lot of factors determined the voting behavior of the graduate youths in the August 23-24 harmonized elections in Zimbabwe. The majority of the graduate youths did not vote because they were not registered while some were turned away

because their names were not in the voters' roll despite having registered. Southhall (2013) analyzed how and why ZANU PF won the 2013 election in similar findings also established in this study. Southhall (2013) argued that MDC-T and local monitoring groups such as ZESN complained that the voter roll was heavily manipulated. The same reason was found in this study to have affected graduate youths who wanted to exercise their right to vote. Based on the argument by Fraga & Holbein (2020), college youths' vote is significant in elections since it highly contributes towards change.

Most of the graduate youths did not vote because they were frustrated with ZEC's delays to deliver ballot papers especially in urban areas. Many had to spend a lot of time in long queues since ballot papers did not arrive in time. The ruling Zanu-PF government and ZEC have repeatedly employed this tactic to frustrate urban voters who they know are opposition party supporters. Long queues and waiting times for voter verification were also reported to be a major challenge that was experienced. Therefore, frustration through delays during elections in polling places was not new to the Zimbabwean situation. Harris (2021) analyzed election administration, resources, and turnout in Kenya. The study also found out that the 2017 elections in Kenya were characterized by frustrating situations such as long queues for the voters and congested polling stations that sparked violence in some places. Some graduate youths who are self-employed did not go to vote because they were concentrating on their side hustles.

#### Attitudes held by the graduate youths toward voting

It was found that the majority of the graduate youths held positive attitudes toward the elections with the hope that regime change would liberate them. On the contrary, a few graduate youths were pessimistic about elections showing a loss of hope on the impact of elections in Zimbabwe. A study by Holbein & Hilygus (2020) analyzed how intimidation affected graduate youths to vote in France. Desrues (2019) established that graduate youths held positive political attitudes toward voting in North Africa (Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria). Youths were found to be a strong population segment that can push for regime change. The findings are similar to the Zambian situation which highly contributed to regime change that brought in a new opposition party to form a new government led by President Haikande Hichilema. Notably, the general life and economy of Zambia have positively changed and graduate youths have managed to get stable employment, and salaries for the majority have been increased accordingly. Few studies have been conducted specifically on the attitudes of graduate youths in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular in which graduates in professions such as social work are less involved in politics as compared to other disciplines.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study underscores a critical disconnect between the graduate youths' political agency and their actual electoral participation in Zimbabwe, revealing that their significant potential as a catalyst for democratic change is systematically undermined by both structural and attitudinal barriers. The findings indicate that while many graduate youths possess a hopeful, change-oriented attitude toward voting, mirroring trends observed in other African contexts like Zambia and North Africa, their turnout is severely suppressed by deliberate administrative failures such as voter roll manipulation and logistical delays that echo tactics documented in Kenya and Zimbabwe's own electoral history. These institutional obstacles, compounded by socioeconomic pressures and a growing undercurrent of pessimism among some, effectively neutralize a key

demographic, thereby perpetuating the political status quo and eroding the integrity of the electoral process. Ultimately, the study affirms that without genuine electoral reforms to address these disenfranchising mechanisms, the transformative power of graduate youth votes, as emphasized by scholars like Fraga and Holbein, will remain an unrealized force in Zimbabwean politics.

#### Recommendations

The study recommended that;

- i. Graduate youths should be educated and empowered to embrace themselves in being participants in active politics and take up influential decision-making positions.
- ii. Beyond general empowerment, universities, civil society organizations, and political parties should develop targeted programs that equip graduate youths with practical skills for political engagement, from grassroots mobilization to policy analysis, specifically preparing them to assume influential decision-making positions.
- iii. Institutions that train social workers in Zimbabwe and related stakeholders should advocate for political social work to promote a culture of voting and political participation among the youth. This will positively transform voting behavior among the graduate youths especially social workers in Zimbabwe.
- iv. To address the systemic issue of ZEC being used as a tactical tool, legal and constitutional reforms must be enacted to guarantee its operational and financial independence from the executive. This should be coupled with robust external audit mechanisms and inclusive stakeholder oversight to rebuild public trust in electoral administration.
- v. The government must repeal or amend laws that stifle political participation and civic activism, ensuring the protection of political rights and freedom of association for all citizens, especially the youth. This reduces the climate of intimidation and enables issue-based campaigning and peaceful political activity.
- vi. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission should adopt modern technologies to reduce the frustrating processes required during voting. This will prevent delays in the delivery of ballot papers as well as the manipulation of the voters' roll.

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