

The Zimbabwe Electoral Process and Attendant Issues: the Voters' Views

Summary Report

Mass Public Opinion Institute, Harare

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Introduction

In democratic polities, voting is the supreme act of citizen participation. In fact, voting is one of the 'procedural minimum' of democracy. Granted there are numerous ways and methods of participation but voting is easily the most visible and in all likelihood, the most effective method of 'speaking truth to power.' In Zimbabwe, the fundamental battle cry for all nationalist and liberation movements was: "One man, one vote." The nationalist demand was for voting as an inalienable right. In his *Voting for Democracy: Electoral Politics in Zimbabwe* (1992, 6), Jonathan Moyo made an acute observation: "The right to vote has a historical significance in Zimbabwe which dates back to the struggle against colonialism for Independence. How that right is being exercised in post-colonial Zimbabwe is a matter which should not be taken for granted."

There are numerous electoral systems in our global community and where voting is concerned, some systems require adult citizens to register (as in the USA) while in others (e.g. many European countries) citizens do not have to register or may do so in a simple, convenient, almost automatic way. In the former category, the requirements for voter registration (e.g. residency laws) and ponderous registration procedures present serious obstacles to the prospective voter. Zimbabwe falls in this category.

In conducting this study, we did not take anything for granted and we approached it with an open mind.

In Zimbabwe, voter registration constitutes the most crucial component and qualifier for participation in elections. Registration is entirely voluntary. The Zimbabwe government allows its citizens to register or check their registration status each time there are planned elections and this normally kicks off about nine months prior the elections. Zimbabweans who turn 18 can also register since they would have become eligible. The government also provides time for inspecting the voters' register. Researches have consistently shown that while a majority of Zimbabweans express much enthusiasm and desire to vote, fewer take the necessary and required step towards voting, i.e. registration and fewer still actually turn out to vote?

Since the turn of the millennium, elections in Zimbabwe have proved to be highly contestable political activities and their outcomes equally controversial. This has escalated political conflict and tension in society while the government elected via these elections suffers from legitimacy questions. This survey study sought answers to a whole range of elections-related issues and sought to do by asking the voters themselves. Below, we tender the survey findings. On the whole, rural Zimbabweans are more upbeat about elections than their urban counterparts.

On Elections and Voter Registration

- We find that Zimbabweans invest considerable importance in elections with three quarters (74%) saying elections are important to them. More rural residents (77%) than urbanites (69%) were of this view. A quarter (26%) finds elections of no value.
- Further, six in ten adult Zimbabweans say their vote “influences government policies.” Equally important is that an overwhelming majority (93%) reported that their vote is a secret.
- Over two thirds (68%) of the respondents reported that they are registered voters while the other third are not. We note a rural-urban gap on this matter (a trend repeated throughout the study) with nearly three quarters (73%) of the rural adults claiming that they were registered compared to six in ten (61%) of their urban counterparts, a 12-percentage gap.
- Commenting on the registration process, eight in ten (79%) apparently know *where* to register, 76% *how* to register and up to 83% said they were knowledgeable about the registration requirements (see Figure 1). For each of these, there were bigger proportions of rural than urban people. For example, on knowledge about where to register, 83% of the rural but 72% of the urban people were aware.

Figure 1: Knowledge on Voter registration



Of importance to note is that voter registration is not considered a hassle; 47% said it is “very easy” and another 33% said it is “easy.”

- On satisfaction with the voter registration process in Zimbabwe, two in three (66%) are satisfied but one in seven (14%) are dissatisfied. A fifth of the respondents (20%) were undecided i.e. they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- On inspection of the voters’ roll, a little more than half (52%) had inspected the voters’ roll while the rest had not bothered to do so. Reasons for not inspecting the voter’s roll included: lack of knowledge of the inspection times (6%); 10% did not have the time; 7% lacked interest while one in hundred (1%) were deterred by the long distance to the inspection centre.
- Contrary to expectations, there is a general consensus that the voters’ roll is reliable; over seven in ten (72%) adult Zimbabweans expressed trust in the voters’ roll. This probably explains the high proportion that did not inspect the voter register; they were not anxious to inspect it. To be noted is that significantly more rural residents (78%) expressed trust than urban dwellers (62%).
- In the event of a registered voter’s name being left out of the register, just over half (52%) of the respondents reported that they would “lodge a complaint through proper channels or procedures”; three in ten (29%) would take no action presumably because they doubt if any corrective measures will be made.
- Relatedly, two thirds (67%) are not acquainted with procedures for making a complaint about the voters’ roll.

On Elections and Voter Apathy

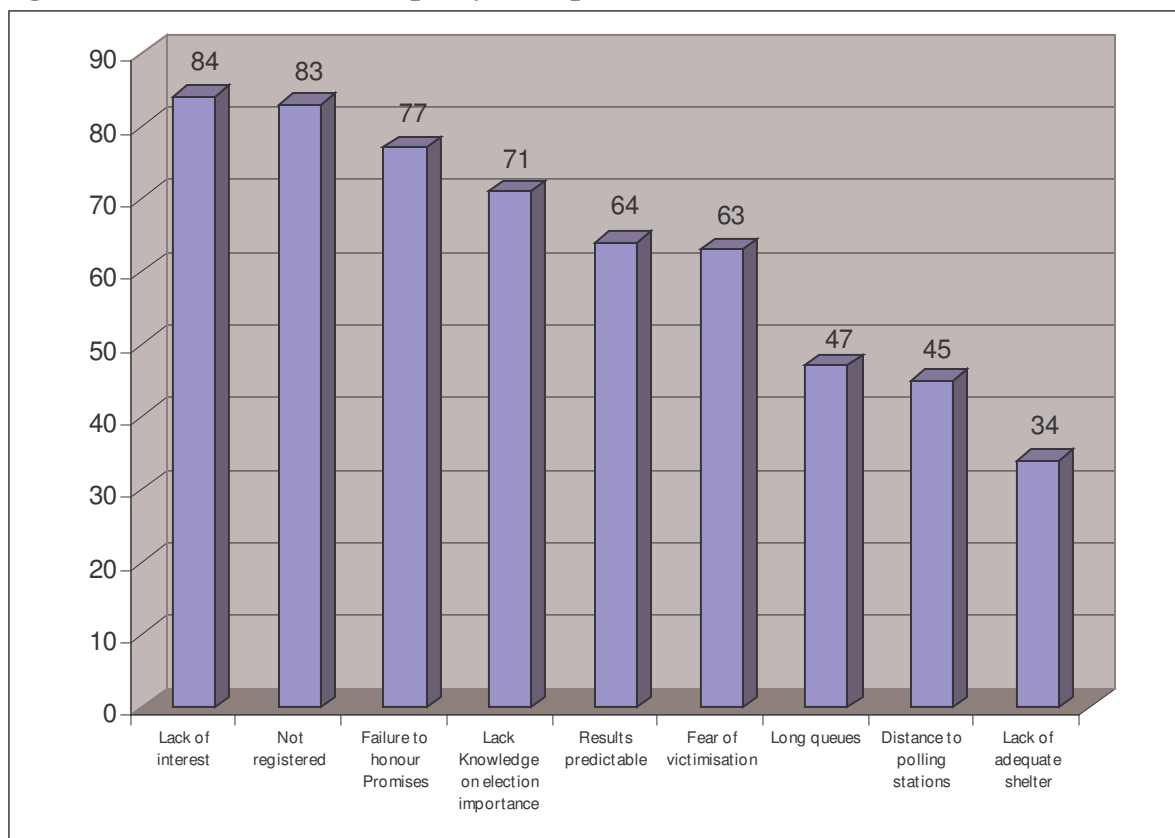
If Zimbabweans regard elections as important, that elections influence public policies and consider their vote as a secret, do they actually pour out to vote? Apart from the founding elections in 1980, elections in the country have become legendary for low voter turnouts. The last national elections – the October 2005 Senate elections – registered a paltry 19% voter turnout. Why are people abstaining from the ‘mother’ of all political participation? The Zimbabwe Electoral Processes and Reform study endeavoured to find out. A word of caution is that survey estimates of voter turnout are rarely accurate and this is a world-wide phenomenon¹. The study revealed that:

- For the March 2005 House of Assembly elections six in ten respondents said they had registered to vote but just above half (53%) took the trouble to cast their votes. About a fifth (19%) were not registered, 7% decided not to vote whilst a total of 2% reported that they failed to locate the polling station, or were prevented from voting and or were too busy to vote. Note: the official voter turnout was estimated at 45%??

¹ On this, Bratton et al. commented: “Survey estimates of voter turnout have their own shortcomings. As is common in other parts of the world for political acts considered obligatory, Africans overreport their involvement in voting.” The authors explain this tendency with the need by respondents to associate themselves with the act of voting given that, like democracy, “voting is infused with a positive aura that has escalated professed political behaviour” (2005, 146).

- In the 2005 Senatorial elections, more than a third (36%) claimed to have participated while 14% decided not to vote. This self-reported voter turnout was almost twice as high as the officially reported voter turnout of 19%.
- The 2006 local government elections seem to have drawn more voters as compared to the Senatorial elections, with four in ten adult Zimbabweans saying they participated in these elections.
- We asked our informants to give their opinions on the possible reasons behind voter apathy. Figure 2 presents the results. Six of the nine ‘reasons’ were found to be potentially culpable and, in their order, these are: (1) lack of interest (84%); (2) voter not being registered (83%); (3) disillusionment at broken promises by politicians (77%); (4) lack of knowledge about importance of elections (71%); (5) the predictability of electoral outcomes (64%); and (6) fear of political victimisation (63%).

Figure 2: Reasons for Voter Apathy – Peoples’ Views



Notes: Figures represents percentages of respondents explaining low voter turn out.

- The above are reasons that possibly drive people away. But what drives them to the polling booth, i.e. what motivates Zimbabweans to vote? A plurality (36%) cited “desire for change”, a quarter (25%) do so because it an “obligation as a Zimbabwean citizen”, another 15% are spurred to vote because of “promises of a better life”. A little more than one in ten (12%) are attracted to the polling booth

by the “candidate’s party” while 7% consider the calibre of the candidate as an important pulling factor in deciding to participate in elections. The findings are more spectacular when partisan sympathies are taken factored in as Table 1 does.

Table 1: Voting Motivators, by Partisanship

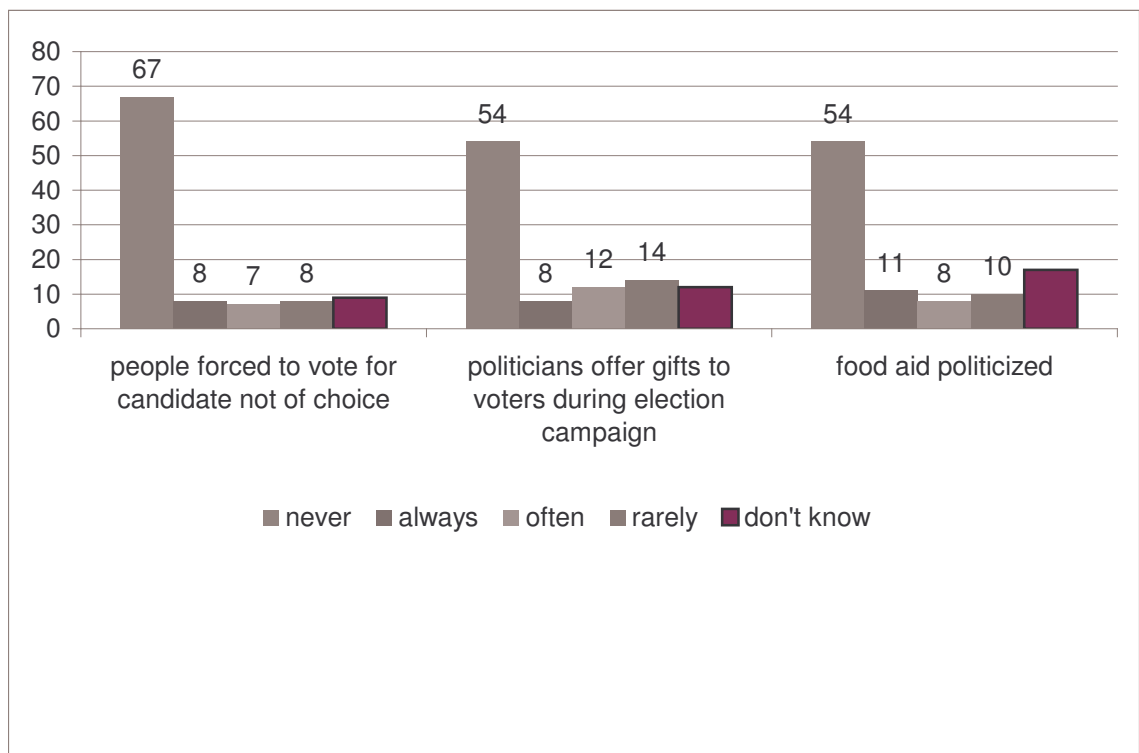
Motivators	Zanu-PF	MDC-Tsvangirai	MDC-Mutambara
Desire for change	20	60	43
My citizen obligation to vote	31	13	14
Promises of a better life	16	17	21
Candidate’s party	23	3	-
Candidate’s credentials	7	4	7
Other	3	2	14

Question: What motivates you to vote?

The results reveal that three times as many MDC-Tsvangirai supporters vote for change than is the case with the ruling party people. Perhaps this is because the word “change” is part of the name of the opposition party. On citizen obligation to vote, Zanu-PF supporters are twice as likely to be inspired by this than their MDC-Tsvangirai counterparts. “Promises of a better life” is a motivation that is evenly spread and is the second most important motivator for MDC people. The name of the party is a strong voter puller for Zanu-PF while it is rather insignificant for the MDC. The credentials of the candidate are also more important for ruling party sympathisers than for those of the MDC. These results suggest that the MDC formations have not managed to glue their supporters to the MDC as a party organisation.

- Could it be that Zimbabweans are attracted to the polling booth by ‘incentives’ offered by those campaigning, e.g. voting buying, food offers etc? We find little evidence of such ‘irregularities.’ First is that two thirds of the respondents denied that in their community, people were being “forced to vote for a candidate not of their choice;” only 15% acknowledged this happening “always” or “often”, Figure 3.
- On politicians offering gifts to voters during election campaigns, nearly seven in ten (68%) said “never” (54%) or “rarely” (14%). However, two in ten (20%) confirmed the existence of this practice.
- What about food aid; is it politicised as widely alleged? Nearly two thirds (64%) denied this happening in their community but two in ten (19%) corroborated this.
- However, there is a big gap in assessments between rural and urban respondents with 70% of the former denying this ‘dirty’ trick while only 55% shared this response in the urban areas. We also find a very wide partisan gap in assessments with 73% of Zanu-PF sympathisers denying food aid politicisation against 52% of the MDC-T supporters. Of the ruling party followers, only 13% acknowledge the politicisation of food aid while nearly four in ten (37%) of Tsvangirai’s MDC supporters allege its existence.

Fig 3: Vote Buying and Politicisation of Food Aid



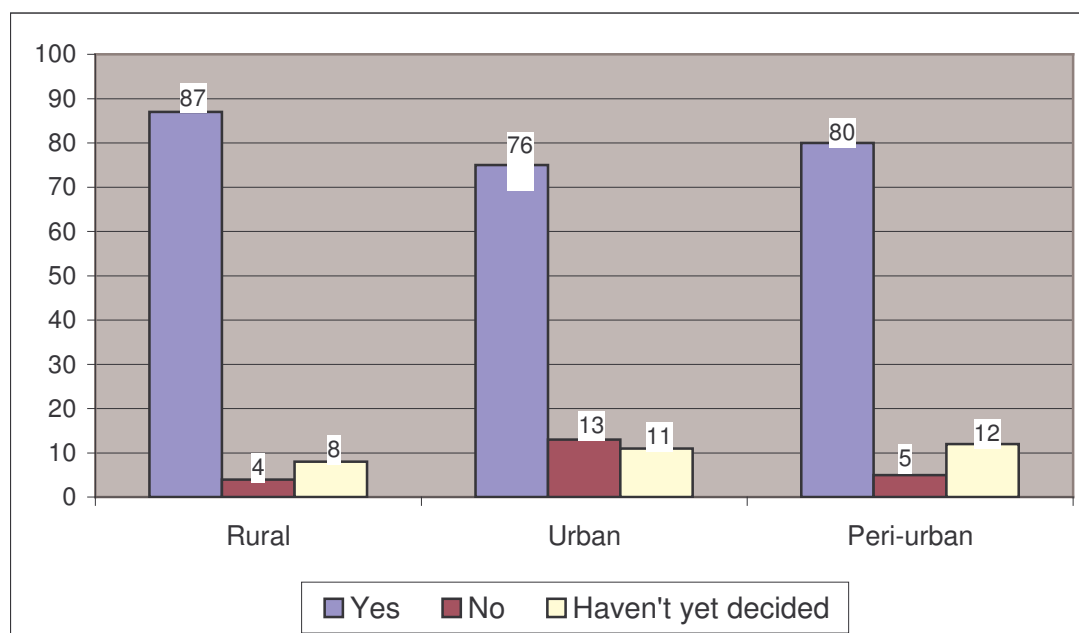
The 2008 Harmonized Elections

At the end of 2006, Zimbabweans woke up to the news that the Government and the ruling party were actively considering “harmonising” all elections, that is, holding all elections at the same time in order to “save resources.” This matter was tabled at the ruling Zanu-PF annual conference and seemed to have triggered animated but inconclusive debate. The proposed consolidation or synchronisation of elections is still a subject of considerable public interest and discussion. The matter is now before the Parliament of Zimbabwe in the form of Constitutional Amendment No. 18. Many commentators appreciate the principle of synchronisation but had questioned the timing of the synchronised elections, which was originally going to be in 2010. Subsequently, President Robert Mugabe revealed that the consolidated elections were all now going to be held in 2008 together with the scheduled presidential elections. The proposed harmonisation was said to have been endorsed by “the people” after consultations. This study sought to also find out from the people their views on the above proposals and the importance people attach to the 2008 elections given that for many those elections qualify to be called “critical elections.”² Our study finds out that:

² According to Jonathan Moyo, “Critical elections are those which produce major realignments in voter coalitions and shifts in public policy, elections in which citizens, through the electoral process, help to produce fundamental changes in public policy” (1992, 15). Also see “Critical Elections: Congressional Parties and Clusters of Policy Changes”, *British Journal of Political Science*, 7 (1978), 79-99.

- Zimbabweans attach a great deal of importance to the 2008 elections as reflected by 82% describing the next year elections as either “very important” (60%) or “important” (22%). Just a little more than one in ten (13%) judged the 2008 elections as “not important” or “not very important”. The responses to this question clearly suggest that even part of the 26% who earlier said elections are not important think that the 2008 harmonised elections are important. This makes these elections really ‘critical’.
- On voting intentions, the survey revealed that an overwhelming majority (83%) have set their minds to voting, 8% are not going to, whilst 9% still need to decide. We again find that even those who are dismissive of elections intend to cast their vote. As compared to their urban counterparts, a larger majority (87%) of rural residents would participate in the 2008 elections against 76% of urban residents, Figure 4.
- Disaggregated on partisan lines, we find that more pro-ZANU PF (93%), would participate in the 2008 elections compared to 82% supporters of the MDC-Morgan Tsvangirai party. Conversely, non-participation is more pronounced with the MDC-T supporters: 6% of these people are going to abscond compared to 3% of Zanu-PF supporters. Similarly, we find that three times (12%) as many MDC-T sympathisers are undecided compared to only 4% of the ruling party followers.
- If we consider only those who were “decided” as of May 2007 (about 49% of the total survey) that they were going to vote i.e. only those who answered “yes” to the question, we find that six in ten voters (62%) would vote for Zanu-PF, a little over a third (35%) would cast their vote for the opposition MDC-T and 2% for Arthur Mutambara’s MDC.

Figure 4: Participation in the 2008 Elections



Question: Do you intend to vote in the 2008 elections?

- A cardinal test of democratic elections is whether they are free and fair. Given that the 2008 elections meet the criteria of “critical elections”, do voters expect the 2008 elections to be free and fair? Apparently, our respondents are not so sanguine, with less than half (46%) expressing confidence that these ‘critical elections’ will be free and fair. Just over one in ten (12%) have no confidence while four in ten (39%) could not pre-judge. Is opinion on this split on partisan lines? Table 2 provides the answer.

Table 2: Freeness and Fairness of 2008 Elections, by Party Affiliation

	Zanu-PF	MDC-Tsvangirai	MDC-Mutambara
Yes, will be free and fair	62	32	29
No, will not be free and fair	4	35	43
Don't know	34	33	29

Question: Do you think the 2008 elections will be free and fair?

It is clearly evident that assessments vary wildly on partisan lines. Over six in ten Zanu-PF aligned people project the 2008 elections to be free and fair compared to about half that proportion of the MDC people. In fact, pluralities of both MDC-T and MDC-M supporters expect the elections to be less than free and fair. A third of each of the three party supporters could not hazard an answer.

On Voter/Civic Education

Governments everywhere are always expected to provide voter/civic education to their people. A movement from citizen parochialism to citizen participation is only possible when governments create the necessary forum to educate their people. Voter/civic education remains a powerful tool in creating critical citizens. In early September 2007, the Government announced that it was planning to promote social, moral and patriotic values by introducing civic education in all schools. How much ground has our government covered in this area? What of the complimentary efforts from the civic community, has this been felt by the public? Assessments were also done on this important area.

- Nearly seven in ten (68%) had never received any voter/civic education while only 32% had.
- On whether educators come to deliver voter/civic education in their communities, six in ten (59%), said “never”, and another 20% said “rarely.” This means up to eight in ten had not had contact with civic/voter educators in their communities. At the other end, 30% had either “often” (16%) or “always” (14%) come across or witnessed these voter/civic educators.
- For those who received voter education, who provided it? Two in ten (21%) reported that it was Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), officially the only

body mandated to provide voter education but political parties and NGOs can also deliver it if approval is granted. civic Political parties provided voter education to only 4% of the electorate; another 3% could not recall the name of the service provider. Just a minute 1% had received their training through the auspices of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

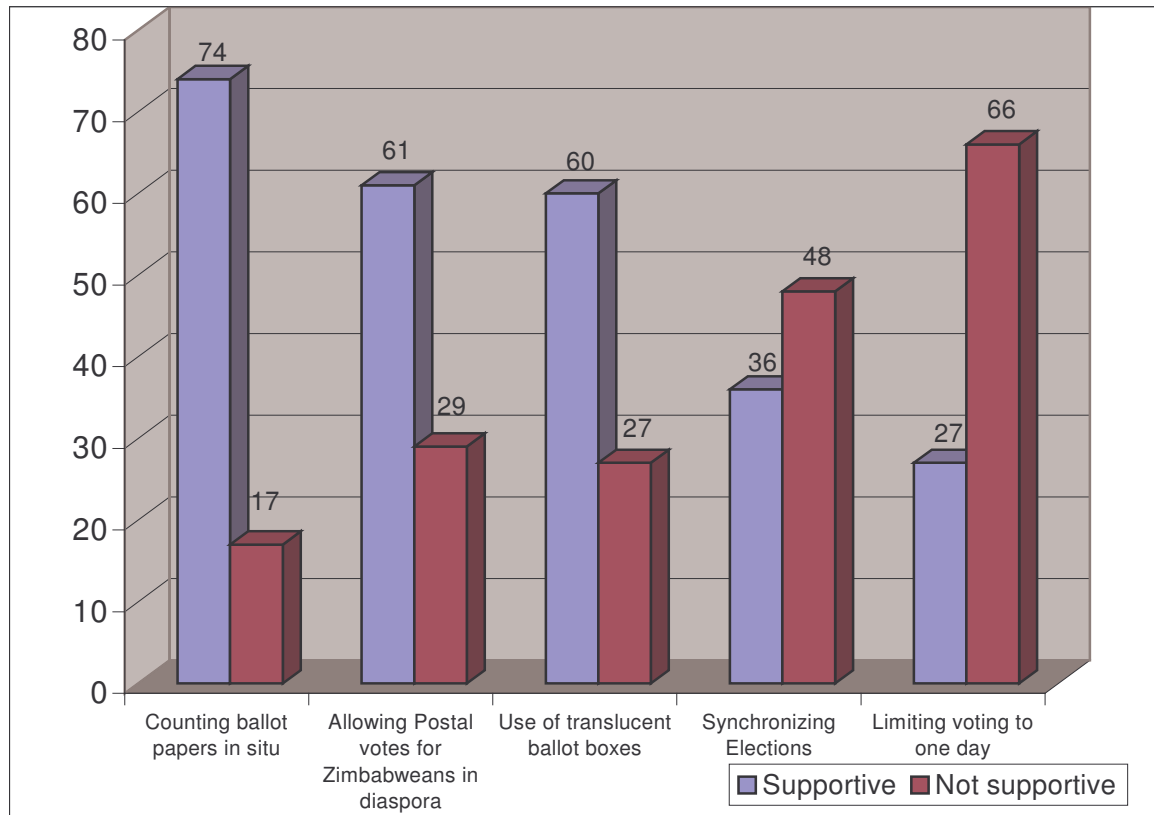
- On whether those who had received voter education had benefited from it, 87% reported that indeed they had compared to 13% who thought the training added no value to their political life.
- Those who had received voter education commended it with close to nine in ten (88%) saying they were “very satisfied” (49%) or “satisfied” (39%). Only 6% complained of not being satisfied.
- To this extent, Zimbabweans are of the opinion that voter/civic education should not be conducted seasonally but should be an on going process. Close to nine in ten (88%) think that it should be a continuous activity, and that it should be provided either by the government (46%), NGOs (17%) and political parties (7%).
- The general conclusion then is that voter educators are doing a good job and should be allowed more space to expand their activities. Clearly there is a great but unsatisfied demand and need out there. Citizens are crying out for voter education: who is listening?

On Electoral Reforms

On 17 August 2004, at the SADC Summit in Mauritius, and in response to mounting domestic and international pressure, the Government of Zimbabwe adopted the SADC Guidelines and Principles governing democratic elections. These entailed a number of reforms e.g. voting in one day and not two or more days as was the tradition in previous elections, counting ballots at the point they were cast etc. The March 2005 Parliamentary elections were the first elections to be held under the new reforms. The Zimbabwe Electoral Processes and Reform study also gathered the views of Zimbabweans on these reforms. Do Zimbabweans approve or disapprove such reforms? See Figure 5.

- On confining voting to only one day, exactly two thirds (66%) do not support this electoral change, whilst less than three in ten (28%) are supportive.
- Tuning to the use of translucent instead of opaque/wooden boxes, six in ten (61%) are supportive but three in ten (29%) are against; 5% are neither supportive nor against, whilst 5% could not judge.
- On the hot issue of allowing Diaspora Zimbabweans to vote, as agitated for by the MDC and some civic organisations, the study showed that in fact a sizeable majority of Zimbabweans (61%) is in support, whilst half of this proportion (29%) is against. If the general public had its way, it would allow their compatriots scattered in the Diaspora to cast their vote.

Figure 5: Zimbabweans' view on the Electoral Reforms



- Regarding counting of ballot papers at the polling station, three quarters (74%) supported this move but 17% were against
- On the crucial question of synchronization of the Presidential and Parliamentary elections, the survey asked the court of public opinion to approve or disapprove of this controversial reform that is also the subject of Constitutional Amendment 18. Almost half of the respondents (48%) disapproved of the harmonization of the Presidential and Parliamentary elections but over one third (36%) endorse the move. By residential location, more than half (54% of urbanites reject the proposal but a large plurality (45%) of rural dwellers also do.

Cognitive Engagement and Political Party Affiliation

Zimbabwe, like other African countries, has a predominantly oral culture, which is part of what has been described as the African 'palaver tradition.' In other words, discussion is a critical mode of communication and therefore, informal communication is a supplement to the organised mass media as a device for informing and even mobilising the public. After seven years of crisis which some place on the door of 'poor governance,' do Zimbabweans feel the urge to discuss political and policy issues? Or do they feel deterred by the strictures in the controversial Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA)?

- The survey revealed that three in ten (29%) of adult Zimbabweans is “very interested” and another 23% are “somewhat interested” meaning slightly more than half (52%) of Zimbabweans reported self-expressed interest in public affairs. Combining the two response categories, we find that of the ten administrative provinces, Matabeleland North has a high attention span (64%) while its urban counterpart (Bulawayo) reported the least interest (39%) in public matters.
- When they get together with family and friends, do Zimbabweans discuss political matters? A little more than two in ten (22%) said they “frequently” discuss political matters, while another 48% do so “occasionally.” Nearly three in ten Zimbabweans (28%) find political matters a taboo subject to talk about even with friends and relatives. We find no significant rural-urban divide on this. However, the survey reveals that the ‘palaver tradition’ is deeper in Zanu-PF strongholds of Mashonaland Central where 86% said they discuss political issues “frequently” (16%) or “occasionally” (70%), followed by Mashonaland West (81%). Bulawayo residents are the most gagged with only 53% discussing politics while 43% “never” do.
- For whatever reason, survey evidence suggests that Zimbabweans have become cautious of what they have to say. We asked: “How often do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?” and more than half (54%) said people have to be careful “always” (39%). Less than four in ten (37%) reported on being anxious only “rarely” (15%) or “never” (22%). Urban residents (57%) have to be more cautious than their rural cousins (52%) while people in Manicaland (64%) reported being anxious, followed by Bulawayo dwellers (60%).
- Lastly, asked to name the party of their preferred candidate, “if Parliamentary elections were to be held today”, exactly one third (33%) would vote for ZANU PF, two in ten (21%) for MDC-Morgan Tsvangirai while 21% refused to answer. About one in ten (11%) said that their vote is their secret, whilst 12% cited other political parties. Only one percent of the total respondents said they would prefer MDC- Arthur Mutambara.
- Further analysis confined only to a sub-sample of those who revealed their partisan sympathies (that is, excluding those who said their vote is a secret or refused to answer) shows that six in ten (59%) are aligned to the ruling Zanu-PF; nearly four in ten (38%) to Morgan Tsvangirai’s MDC; and just 2% to Arthur Mutambara’s MDC. This means that had there been elections at the time of the sample (i.e. in April/May 2007), the ruling party would have comfortably sailed to victory *even without* the coercive ‘persuasion’ the party is often accused of. It would win on the back of its rural support from which the party draws three quarters (74%) of its support, 22% and 4% is drawn from urban and peri-urban areas respectively. Tsvangirai’s MDC draws 57% of its support in the rural areas, 41% in the urban areas and 2% in the peri-urban areas.
- Looked at from another angle, 40% of rural residents expressed their support for Zanu-PF, 20% for MDC-Tsvangirai, 1% for MDC-Mutambara and 1% for the UPP. The rest (38%) either said their vote is a secret or refused to answer. In the urban areas, 20% support the ruling party, 24% for MDC-Tsvangirai, 1% for Mutambara’s MDC and another 1% for the UPP. The rest (54%) refused to answer or said their vote is their secret. This suggests that there are many

‘uncaptured’ supporters who are yet to be one by the various contenders for power.

Table 3: Party Support, by Province

	Zanu-PF	MDC-T	MDC-M	UPP	Zanu-Ndonga	My vote is secret	Refused to answer	Other
Harare	27	26	0	0	0	17	8	22
Bulawayo	3	15	6	4	0	29	26	17
Mash East	39	17	0	0	0	5	30	9
Mash West	43	13	0	0	0	15	21	8
Mash Central	55	10	0	1	1	14	7	14
Midlands	28	24	1	0	0	11	19	17
Manicaland	41	24	1	0	0	5	27	2
Masvingo	30	30	2	0	0	1	33	5
Mat North	21	19	4	4	0	15	18	18
Mat South	26	27	3	0	2	9	23	11

- Provincially, we find that Zanu-PF support is strongest in Mashonaland Central where 55% of the total sample claimed they would vote for the party, followed by Mashonaland West (43%) and is weakest in Bulawayo (3%). Masvingo is the strongest support base for MDC-T with 30% saying they would vote for the party’s candidate, followed by Matabeleland South (27%) and Harare (26%). MDC-Tsvangirai is weakest in Mashonaland Central (10%) and Mashonaland West (13%). Mutambara’s MDC is strongest in Bulawayo (6%), Matabeleland North (4%) and Matabeleland South (3%).
- The above results should be viewed with caution and as indicative given the large reservoir of uncommitted voters, i.e. those who refused to disclose their partisan affiliations or sympathies. This is particularly so in Bulawayo where up to seven in ten (72%) were ‘shy’ to reveal their voting intentions, Matabeleland South (51% uncommitted) and Harare (47% not committed).

Conclusion

This study is probably the first systematic study on the electoral and attendant processes and issues in post-2000 Zimbabwe.