

THE RURAL ELECTORATE IN ZIMBABWE'S ELECTIONS 1980-2018

Consciousness and Voting Preferences

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses rural electorate consciousness and urban voting preferences during Zimbabwe's elections from 1980 to 2018. The article gives agency to the rural dwellers in elections, contrary to the general perception of a captured rural voter and liberal urban voter. To analyse rural voters' electoral consciousness, the paper uses primary sources (electoral statistical records), oral interviews (notwithstanding the prevailing COVID-19 lockdown environment) and secondary literature to derive research data. The data helps to determine the differences between urban and rural ideologies, culture and ethics which manifest in the political party preferences of the social groups in the two geographical spaces. The paper concludes that rural dwellers tended to support the ruling party at elections, though they were more vulnerable to political patronage and seemingly forced participation in electoral processes than the urban voters. Nonetheless, complex cultural, economic, social and historic factors compelled them to participate in elections more than their urban counterparts. Thus, rural voters can be viewed as conscious participants in electoral processes with varied, albeit mobilised participation and political ideologies.

Keywords: elections, rural-urban voting preferences, political participation, ZANU-PF, MDC, African nationalism, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses rural electorate consciousness and urban voting preferences during elections in Zimbabwe, from 1980 to 2018. It argues that broad but

intriguing political, historical, economic, social and demographic factors inform the political party preferences among Zimbabwean voters in elections. These factors are interesting, but they are also too broad to provide an answer to our targeted political question. It is thus our submission that all political phenomena and questions can be explained by political, historical, economic, social, and demographic factors. However, the factors which directly and indirectly influence voting patterns in Zimbabwe's elections need elaboration. In this paper, we attempt to move from the intriguing, although abstract level to analyse specific political, socio-economic, historical, and demographic factors related to our answer. Based on evidence from our research, we contend that the issues determining voter preferences in the country are complex.

At the political level, the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government participates in elections by using its political position to intervene not only in political matters, but also in the economy and other sectors. It influences elections primarily through the medium of nationally-enacted electoral laws, policies, and political strategies. These are designed to lure voters to the ruling ZANU-PF party, and at the same time deploy strategies to destabilise political opposition. In elections, the party's position is strengthened by taking advantage of socio-economic factors such as the rural or urban area-based deprivation of households. Most households, beset by an unabating economic crisis which has torn Zimbabwe's social fabric since the 1990s, find themselves deprived of not only political leverage but also education (e.g., voter education), occupation/profession, employment, income and sustainable livelihoods.

Demographic factors such as age, sex, income level, marital status, race, employment, location (rural or urban), home ownership (or lack of), and level of education or educational achievement are also used during elections to prepare people to vote for a particular political party. ZANU-PF party elites often appealed to conscience and consciousness of the country's liberation history to discourage people from voting for opposition political parties. Here intimate relationships between people and historical events are invoked. The people are reminded – at times through intimidatory propaganda – of their historical and indeed historic commitment to the freedom struggle of the 1960s and 1970s. They are also told repeatedly that ignoring the past is tantamount to ignoring the present. Some are even scared of a resumption of war if an opposition party is elected to power. These historical factors have influenced rural electorate consciousness and voting preferences in Zimbabwe since the first multi-party elections in 1980.

In the midst of the ruling party's multiple election-winning strategies, a line has been drawn to separate the rural from the urban voter. The rural voter has been widely viewed as a victim and captured accomplice of the party's election victories, while the urban voter has been perceived as a liberal progressive voter

seeking a change in government. This paper argues that although ZANU-PF is accused of capturing the rural peasantry and employing unorthodox strategies to win elections, the rural voters were politically conscious and voted for a party they thought would meet their social, cultural and economic aspirations while at the same time fitting into their liberation ideological conceptions.

Our paper therefore questions the applicability of the captive constituency effects theory in analysing Zimbabwean elections and voting patterns. The captive constituency theory states that in comparison to their urban counterparts, rural voters are more likely to have less political autonomy when voting. Koter (2013) argues that rural areas are 'captive constituencies' and do not have the freedom to choose how to vote, because of the influence of social power structures. He believes that the rural areas have a tighter social structure which makes the electorate less autonomous.

Koter also suggests that urbanites tend to be more individualistic in their choice of a political party, while the rural electorate cast their vote based on a solidarity steeped in history and in the captive constituency theory. This theory argues that the poorer, the more remote, more economically marginal and less literate an electoral constituency is, the more isolated and less autonomous its voters are likely to be (Wahman & Boone 2018, p. 189), thus removing the sense of agency from the rural electorate. Our paper attempts to give agency to the rural dwellers as we do not view them as necessarily captured. We question the captive constituency effect theory and this ascribed captive status as it relates to Zimbabwe's elections. Instead, we argue that rural people were not passive voters and were instead responsible for creating the political culture and social structures that inform their voting preferences.

We therefore proffer the social group theory of voting behaviours as an alternative, as it explains Zimbabwe voter preferences better than the captive constituency theory. The social group theory we are suggesting shows that social, economic, religious and other forms of identification relating to political interaction inform voter choices (Aiba 2002). According to this theory, the individual learns the partisan predisposition conformable to the political traditions of a group. Individuals are joined with others who have shared interests. Filer et al. (1993) show that members of a group vote when it is economically optimal for them to do so. Similarly, rural residents in Zimbabwe were informed not only by promises given by ruling elites of economic improvement, but also by their shared peasantry structures, values and ethos. This also applied to the urban voters who mostly had a shared interest in a semi-liberal urban economy.

The paper is divided into six main sections. Following the introduction, the first section engages with the broad literature on elections and the relevance of the literature to the Zimbabwe electoral situation. In the second section we discuss our

research methodology and how it supports our aim, objectives and conclusion. Section three provides a background to elections in post-colonial Zimbabwe to provide a contextual history. In section four, we analyse key economic and social determinants of voting preferences in the country, as outlined in the introduction; discuss the distinctive gap between rural and urban dwellers and their voting preferences; and also interrogate ZANU-PF's empowerment programmes to discern who is capturing who, ZANU-PF or the people? In the fifth section, we demonstrate the legacy of the liberation war on voter preferences and related questions. In the sixth and final section, we draw on extant literature to explore what we have termed 'violence consciousness' to explain the interface between rural electorate consciousness and general voting preferences in Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper contributes to the larger debates on elections in Zimbabwe and Africa, many of which acknowledge that there are several different factors influencing voters' preferences during elections. For example, Wahman and Boone (2018) illustrate that electoral voting dynamics vary across space, even within a single country, and subnational factors specific to geographic context matter in understanding voting behaviour in Africa. They believe that voting trends for candidates change because the urban electorate base their votes on candidates' performance and whether they have fulfilled the promises they made during pre-election campaigns. In Wahman and Boone's (2018) view, the captive constituency effect is likely to be pronounced in sparsely-populated rural constituencies where subsistence agriculture and pastoral activities dominate. Our study acknowledges that subnational factors in rural and urban areas influence voters' preferences in Zimbabwe elections. Bratton and Masunungure (2018) and Wahman and Boone (2018), in particular, refer to a polarised electorate, and the rural voter or the ruling party supporters as captured. However, rural voters do exhibit agency in that they are conscious of the decisions they make – contrary to views of them in Zimbabwe as a captured constituency.

The extant literature on elections in Africa (for example Boone and Kriger (2010), Magure (2014), and Raftopoulos (2013)) views rural voters as victims of politicians who use land as a source of patronage in elections. Boone and Kriger (2010) argue that in Zimbabwe and Côte d'Ivoire for example, the allocation of land has been the prerogative of the central party-state and land has been used by the respective ruling parties in those countries to 'buy' votes. In Zimbabwe in 2000, ZANU-PF was faced with its stiffest political opposition and sharpest economic decline since the inception of its rule in 1980. The party then orchestrated land

occupations, massive land confiscations and the allocation of white-operated farms to mobilise and reward party loyalists and, to a very limited extent, opponents, in a process known as the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (Boone & Kriger 2010, p. 175). These strategies do not show voter preferences, but voter coercion.

Many studies of Zimbabwe's elections cite violence, coercion or coercive tactics and other unethical practices in elections. However, Magure (2014) and Raftopoulos (2013) argue that although ZANU-PF used authoritarianism and hate speech to win elections, it is important to acknowledge the popularity of the party in rural areas. They cite the ruling party's populist approach regarding land distribution, land rights allocation, indigenisation and empowerment policies as factors that swayed the rural vote in favour of ZANU-PF. This paper uses land as an analytical lens to assess the forms of consciousness that influenced rural voters' political party preferences, and also considers other tactics like organised violence.

Kriger (2005), for instance, demonstrates how ZANU-PF has used not only land but has also organised violence and intimidation as strategies to ensure victory in every election since 1980. Besides violence, the ruling party engaged strategies that demonised its opponents as being reactionary, subversive, anti-land reform and stooges of the whites or the West (Kriger 2005, p. 2). Voter agency is missing from these tactics which view voters as victims of the ruling party's violent strategies. Our research on Zimbabwean elections acknowledges that elections were sometimes characterised by violence and unscrupulous strategies; however it also recognises the active and conscious role played by rural voters in this continuum to sustain the political fortunes of ZANU-PF.

In addition to this apparent connivance by rural voters with the ruling party-state, and allegations of violence and coercion, scholars point to various forms of rigging as part of the election-winning formula used by ZANU-PF (Southall & Slabbert 2013). ZANU-PF allegedly controlled the electoral machinery, including the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), the Registrar General (RG) and his office. Through control of these election institutions, the ruling party has been accused of wielding power to tamper with the voters' roll and the 'counting of what is contained in the ballot boxes [or the votes]' (Southall & Slabbert 2013, p. 140). Another allegation is that during election time ZANU-PF clandestinely bused in rural voters to urban areas in an endeavour to dilute the MDC's urban vote. It is clear that the rural voters who were allegedly bused in to some urban electoral constituencies were conscious of their actions.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012) contextualises the past experiences of Zimbabwean elections by identifying broad historical factors that gave ZANU-PF leverage in elections. He identifies undemocratic processes and cultures which shape

Zimbabwean politics. These include the country's patriarchal and violent pre-colonial history, colonialism which ushered in undemocratic traditions, and African nationalism, together with the armed liberation struggle, which were marked by incidences of violence. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012), these three factors have shaped the undemocratic nature of Zimbabwean elections. His work helps explaining the genesis of violent actions symptomatic of political parties' colonial-era liberation war strategies. In the post-colonial era, the strategies were meant to claim new, independence-found access to economic, social and political opportunities and wealth status, and arguably allay the political and economic deprivation of the past.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2012) study, however, does not account for voter party preferences and consciousness during elections, as the voter is viewed as a victim of undemocratic election processes. Some scholars of Zimbabwe's elections mention violence, coercion and other unethical practices in elections that help ZANU-PF win polls. However, the popularity of the party in the rural areas due to its mobilisation capacity and the way it appeals to the old peasant consciousness dating back to the liberation struggle days, is compared to the MDC and other opposition parties, relatively unquestionable.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In assessing voters' political consciousness and preferences, this article uses qualitative research methods drawing data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was derived mainly from the documents of election organisations and institutions like the ZEC, the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT), Afrobarometer and others. Interviews and raw statistical data were vital for the quality of our study. Personal interviews as data-gathering tools complemented primary documents. Politics and elections being sensitive topics in Zimbabwe, most of our interviews were based on snowball sampling where interviewees pointed us to individuals familiar to them so that they would accommodate our questions during the research.

Two group interviews were conducted in Harare. In some cases, our study uses pseudonyms for interviewees who did not want their real names used for fear of potential reprisals. Due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, some of the interviews in 2021 were conducted telephonically and through a wide array of social media and virtual platforms, while others were face-to-face interviews. Our statistical data and engagement with secondary sources (journals, books, articles and newspapers or the print media) were useful in situating our study in the context of a broader Zimbabwean election discourse, and in grappling with both the captive constituency effect theory and our preferred social group theory as applied to elections in the country.

DISCUSSION

Election Background: Post-Colonial Zimbabwe

In terms of the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979, and yielding to pressure from liberation movements and the armed strife of the Second Chimurenga, the colonial government finally conceded to the 'internal settlement' of Ian Douglas Smith of the Rhodesian Front (RF), then Prime Minister of Rhodesia. This resulted in the short-lived Zimbabwe-Rhodesia government of Abel Muzorewa in 1979. According to Sithole and Makumbe (1997, p. 128) the 'internal settlement' enfranchised the majority of black Zimbabweans who had not been allowed to vote during the colonial period. However, in the 1979 elections, the major political parties representing mainstream nationalism were fighting a guerrilla war and therefore did not take part in the election (ibid.).

Their non-participation in that election raised legitimacy issues about the election process which culminated in the 'all-party' 1980 general elections. In the February 1980 multi-party elections, about 91% of the electorate voted, against the backdrop of support for ZANU-PF from a strong rural constituency. The rural areas had been virtually no-go areas for other political parties and ZANU-PF therefore won the elections with 62% of the ballot and ascended to power (Good 2002, p. 8). The barring of other parties, which was not quite as obvious in the first decade of independence, intensified in the 1990s.

However, by that time, ZANU-PF's dominance in the rural areas was being challenged. Evidence of this challenge to the ruling party in its traditional strongholds included the fact that in 1985 there was a 97% voter turnout and ZANU-PF won, while in 1990 the party won by a declining 78%; and in 1995 it won by only 61% (Good 2002, p.8), marking an apparent shift in the 1990s. Although ZANU-PF won every multi-party election resoundingly between 1980 and 2008, it was often accused of using unorthodox and undemocratic strategies such as vote buying, intimidation through violence, tampering with the voters' roll and monopolising state media. These widely discussed undemocratic tactics on the part of the ruling party remained key to the liberation party's victories.

The pattern of voting, the role of the rural areas and the government in ZANU-PF election victories from 1980 to 2008 have also been analysed. According to several scholars, most of the victories demonstrate that violence and the violation of electoral rules were rife. Gregory (1981), Kriger (2005), and Sithole (1986) were not seriously concerned about ZANU-PF's use of violence and intimidation in 1980 to win power in the first post-colonial election. They attributed ZANU-PF's electoral victory to its effective guerrilla organisation and mobilisation of popular support. However, well-documented violence and other tactics enabled the ruling party to maintain its political presence and influence on Zimbabwe's

electoral processes between the 1980s and 1990s. All this changed drastically after 2000 as ZANU-PF's hegemonic grip on power began to wane under the relentless challenge from opposition politics. The MDC, perceived as the 'saviour' of the people, posed a serious threat to Mugabe and his not-so-popular party, as demonstrated by the ruling party's poor showing in the first round of polling in March 2008. In addition, 2008 marked an important turn in Zimbabwean politics when for the first time ZANU-PF met stiff competition in the form of the MDC formation led by Morgan Tsvangirai.

Commonwealth observers (2018, p. 6) claim that the MDC won the first round of the election in March 2008. However, none of the parties achieved the 50% plus one threshold required by the Constitution to form a government. Given the ruling party's excellent record in previous elections, the outcome of the first round of polls had not been anticipated. The electoral stalemate and impasse between the two major political contestants resulted in the declaration of an election re-run. This in turn resulted in violence generally alleged to have been unleashed by ZANU-PF on MDC supporters in the countdown to the run-off poll scheduled for June 2008.

During the 2008 election-related violence 100 people allegedly died, 200 went missing, thousands were beaten and tens of thousands were forced out of their homes by ZANU-PF militia (*The Guardian* 2008). Consequently, the MDC refused to participate in the election re-run scheduled for June 2008, citing many irregularities, including violence inflicted by ZANU-PF on the opposition formation (Commonwealth 2018, p. 7). The events of March-June 2008 were then followed by a lull in elections as a compromise Government of National Unity (GNU) was established in 2009. This in many ways neutralised ZANU-PF's political dominance.

The GNU was, however, short-lived, with ZANU-PF emerging victorious in the 2013 election. In contrast to earlier polls, the 2013 election was relatively peaceful and the MDC lost not only as a result of ZANU-PF's manipulation of the poll, but because of internal divisions. Other than internal wrangles in the MDC, their election campaign was less effective than that of ZANU-PF because of financial constraints (*The Guardian* 2013). However, notwithstanding the perennial national economic crisis in Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF won the election due to comparatively sound funding. The electoral victory not only helped the ruling party to reassert its political dominance, but ZANU-PF's election victory also signalled the end of the unity government. Thus, from 2008 to 2018, ZANU-PF reclaimed hegemony over elections and has been winning with the rural areas acting as the main swing constituencies for the ruling party.

Clearly, the major trend in the history of Zimbabwean elections is the divide between urban and rural voters. The majority of rural voters have voted for

ZANU-PF while the urban areas have become enclaves for opposition politics. Hence, the rural dwellers who were numerically superior provided more votes for the ruling party compared to urbanites, and preliminary election forecasts reflected the general outcome of elections even before they took place. To add to the comparative advantage of ZANU-PF, rural dwellers were well known for better participation in the election process than urban residents. In fact, the 2018 election showed that the percentage of registered voters was lowest in urban provinces, with Bulawayo having 63.3% and Harare 66.9%, while rural provinces such as Matabeleland North had 87% and Mashonaland East 86.1% (ZEC 2018). Although a ZEC official pointed out that there were fewer polling stations in urban areas than in the rural areas (which affected the voting percentages of urbanites), he admitted that voting was usually high in rural areas. The reasons for this may vary, but voter apathy in urban areas accounts for the significant variance.

The population distribution of Zimbabwe given by ZIMSTAT (2017, p. 32) also confirms that the country's population is mostly rural with 68% of the total found, notably, in the communal and resettlement areas. All provinces in the country have an urban area and the urban population constitutes 32% of the total population estimates (ibid.). Under these circumstances, voter preferences therefore exhibited a distinct dichotomy between rural and urban Zimbabwe. These preferences were influenced by different economic, social and geo-political structures characteristic of the two geographical spaces.

Economic and Social Determinants of Voting Preferences

It is important to understand rural voters' political party preferences based on their economic structures, which are different from modern urban economies. As illustrated in the social group theory of voting, members of a group vote for a party which best serves their economic and other interests. Zimbabwean settlements and economies are divided into a two-tier, dual economic system, a moderated urban economy and extremely rural economy. The different needs of citizens in these two geographical spaces are reflected in and by the voters' political preferences. In contrast to the rural areas the urban way of life is neoliberal, capital-oriented, based on proletarianism and informal entrepreneurship.

Unlike their rural counterparts, the urban population depends more on employment and a conducive environment for trading which is sustained only by a stable money economy. They need the public amenities – housing, water, sewerage reticulation, electricity supply, modern forms of communication and transport systems – of an urban infrastructure. However, the government (and city councils) have failed lamentably to provide these, and this has frustrated urban dwellers who in turn seek refuge in liberal opposition politics. According to Dewa

(2009), because of the frustrations of poor living conditions, most of the people in urban areas do not consider the governance and administrative capabilities of candidates in elections, but vote for a political party that promises change. Dewa's argument was confirmed in an interview on 21 April 2021 by Chareka and Matambo, residents of Ruwa Town, who admitted that they did not even know the names of the councillor and Member of Parliament for whom they voted in the 2018 elections. Matambo therefore believes that most of his friends in Ruwa Town voted for the MDC in anticipation of change after suffering decades of unemployment and economic crisis under a ZANU-PF-led government.

Structurally, the MDC and other opposition political parties are perceived as being able to accommodate and relate to the plight of the urbanites more than that of rural communities. The MDC party, which was launched in 1999, was born out of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Union (ZCTU). It was rooted in the labour movement and attracted membership and support from the workers, the business community and former white farmers (Laakso 2003, p. 157). The opposition party was launched at a time when the urban population was enduring the negative impacts of the neo-liberal Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which brought suffering to urban areas. SAPs reduced government subsidies on services such as health, education and local government service delivery, resulting in increased service fees for the urbanites. The high service fees, coupled with mass retrenchments, were a result of the SAP policy of reducing government expenditure.

The effects of structural adjustment were felt throughout the country, but less in rural areas than in the urban areas – hence the support for the ruling party in the former and aversion to it in the latter. Harding (2010) therefore contends that rural residents voted for incumbent parties because they suffered less during SAPs than did the urban dwellers. In a survey conducted by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI) in 2005, more than 90% of the sampled population in Harare expressed concern about their personal living conditions and blamed the government for the poor economic environment. Hence, the MDC was perceived as representing the interests not only of people living in urban areas, but also the interests of few liberal rural dwellers mostly residing in rural service centres or growth points. Faced with debilitating urban conditions, most of the urban voters thus turned to opposition political parties in anticipation of change in their living conditions, and indeed a change of government.

Interviews we conducted in Harare revealed that most urban voters believed that the rural electorate was letting them down in their quest for a change of government. Yallah, an urban resident of Harare, interviewed in a group on 29 April 2021, was quick to curse rural voters when asked about his opinion of their ZANU-PF preference. Yallah professed a deep dislike of the rural electorate,

blaming them for the economic woes bedevilling the country. He argued that those who voted for the ZANU-PF were greedy and did not have the national interest at heart. During the same group interview, Mundawarara stated that he believed that rural people were not aware of what was expected of government and were often fed false narratives and propaganda by ZANU-PF. The interviews therefore reveal concurrence between scholars, opposition political activists and ordinary urban residents who question the rationality of rural dwellers in decision-making. The arguments of these strata of society in reference to their social position, education and political affiliation invariably negate the agency of people in rural areas during elections.

These arguments, however, fail to appreciate that the rural areas, normally characterised by peasant agriculture, are different from the towns which are dominated by the urban proletariat and an informal trading economy. The rural areas are largely populated by peasant farmers who are fully engaged in subsistence farming while a few people are engaged in off-farm activities in service centres. Of those employed in rural areas, the highest proportion (52%) is in agriculture-related occupations, followed by the paid employee category (23%) (ZIMSTAT 2014).

Peasant forms of economic organisation are inextricably linked with rural social structures and institutions. Thus, peasant economic objectives are necessarily structured by less economic (profit-making) aims (Scott 1976). As Zimbabwe's rural economy is peasant in nature it does not require a sophisticated supporting infrastructure from the government. The rural population provides almost everything for itself with minimum government aid. They build their own homes and sometimes schools with cheap and available material such as poles, mud, grass thatch and home-baked bricks. For Frescura (1980), the distinctive character of rural architecture is therefore derived directly from its use of natural material. Unlike urban areas where building materials are expensive, rural architecture uses its immediate environment as a ready quarry for the materials necessary for construction.

The Distinctive Gap between Rural and Urban Dwellers and their Voting Preferences

Traditional dwelling units in rural areas are found in old-style family settlements in which a number of buildings are made of pole and dagga/bricks, often with thatched grass roofs. More than half of the households (53%) in rural areas are thus either traditional or mixed (ZIMSTAT 2012, p. 57). ZIMSTAT (2012, p. 58) evidence shows that the proportion of households in modern dwelling units ranged from 13% in rural Matabeleland North. In Bulawayo (urban), 99% of

households have their main source of water on the premises while in Matabeleland North (rural) it is 13% (ZIMSTAT 2012, p. 57); 91% of urban households used flush toilets compared to 5% in rural households (ZIMSTAT 2012, p.67). In terms of energy 92% of households in rural areas used wood for cooking whilst 92% of urban households used electricity for cooking (ZIMSTAT 2012, pp. 57). The non-availability or lack of these services in towns influences the urban electorate (unlike the rural electorate), to vote for opposition political parties in elections. In comparison, the peasants grow their own food and use firewood as fuel. Rural households do not require sewerage reticulation since they use pit toilets and get their water from rivers and wells. Rural conditions therefore dictate that most of the rural dwellers thrive on limited infrastructure and government assistance. This is why, in an interview on 18 April, one of the war veterans, Madzinga said mockingly 'the COVID-19 and cholera pandemics have taught urbanites that rural areas are better than urban areas'.

Madzinga's argument was based on the mistaken belief that rural areas are endowed with clean river water, fresh air, healthy food, and admirable conditions not found in urban slums. However, this is not absolutely correct given the endemic environmental contamination in Zimbabwe, where rivers tainted with industrial waste pollute the rural areas. According to Madzinga, the opposition MDC-led urban councils have turned most urban areas into slums with limited public amenities, but the rural population can thrive without urban infrastructure. Although rural and urban frontiers were becoming fluid and there were some intersections of rural and urban life, especially in peri-urban areas, there remained a huge population of rural residents in remote areas with little or no contact with urban life. These, however, are less aggrieved than the urban population and invariably vote for the ruling party in elections. Because of their apparent economic conservatism and political localism, rural and peri-urban dwellers were viewed by urbanites as constituting a problem for political and economic modernisation and change (Roberts 1990).

As stated earlier, this peasant social and economic structure is heavily dependent on land. ZANU-PF took advantage of this situation to create a social base weakened by allegiance to a party that was offering a commodity (land) to the landless rural people in return for political loyalty. A study on factors influencing voter behaviour in rural Zvishavane shows that 61% of voters favoured ZANU-PF because of the party's manifesto, which clearly supports land resettlement (Satiya 2018). The Zvishavane example shows that Zimbabwean peasants have a strong psycho-spiritual attachment to the land and are committed to utilising and defending the land of their ancestors, whose possession they feel they owe to ZANU-PF.

The land redistribution process in the 2000s was thus an astute political move by ZANU-PF to appease the rural peasantry (Raftopoulos 2013). Land redistribution has given 70% of the land to the small farm producers in a process described by Raftopolous as re-peasantisation. After 2000, due to what has been seen as ZANU-PF benevolence, the majority of the rural dwellers had access to relatively cheap land. Magure (2014, p. 22) therefore links the relationship between ZANU-PF and rural voters to the universal nature of the norms of reciprocity, that people should help those who help them. In other words, the people who benefitted from land reform cannot bite the hand that feeds them.

For example, Mawere, a second-generation beneficiary of the 1992 land resettlement scheme in Nyarukowa village in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe, confirmed (in an interview on 17 April 2021) that he had obtained land due to ZANU-PF benevolence. This villager spoke of ZANU-PF's intention to resettle people even prior to the 2000 Land Reform Programme. He denied that the 2000 land reform was a political move, since his father had been resettled in the fertile Nyarukowa lands before the advent of strong opposition politics in Zimbabwe. In light of this, the rural peasants consciously vote for ZANU-PF. Hence, their preference for the ruling party in elections is a rational choice which fits well within the social group theory of voting behaviour, where the rural people's choice of party is primarily influenced by their shared interest in land.

Therefore, the peasants have never been passive recipients of changes from above, and they continue to be important social actors in the agrarian transformations taking place at national level (Roberts 1990). In Zimbabwe some peasants and war veterans were at the centre of the mobilised land reform exercise, but others took part in a spontaneous demand for land. Hence for Nyandoro (2012), 'much of the move towards land reform has been mobilised, but some of it has been spontaneous'. Thus, it is inaccurate to attribute the rural electorate's ZANU-PF preference in its entirety to land patronisation. Although Raftopoulos is of the view that ZANU-PF initiated the land reform process, scholars like Alexander (2007), Mazarire (2009), and Moyo and Yeros (2007), argue that the rural people initiated the process by invading the farms while the government simply regularised the process.

The state was held to ransom by pressure coming from the radical peasants who invaded the land and forced the government to give in, as was the case with the Svosve community in Marondera (Mazarire 2009, p. 338). However, after capitulating to pressure by the peasants, the government championed land reform as if that was its own radical policy. In this way, the state 'interrupted' a peasant revolution and co-opted its malcontents to suit ZANU-PF's political contingencies and agenda. In the same vein, Roberts (1990) has noted that throughout history,

peasants have formed the basis of a centralised political order; and in Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF became part of that order. Therefore, land distribution shows how peasants have captured ZANU-PF in order to safeguard their agriculture interests and not the other way round.

*Empowerment Programmes/Projects:
Who Captures Whom, ZANU-PF or the Peasants?*

Notwithstanding the argument about who captured whom, ZANU-PF invariably supports peasant livelihoods which revolve around farming. The party provides irrigation schemes and farm inputs and facilitates the marketing of products for rural dwellers (Raftopoulos 2013, p. 11). These agricultural support schemes were implemented through various programmes which included the presidential agricultural input support scheme launched in 2007. According to Magure (2014, p. 27), the presidential agricultural input support scheme became a vital cog in ZANU-PF's relationship with the people. The party also introduced a popular farm mechanisation programme in 2007 earmarked to empower both communal and commercial farmers. Under the mechanisation scheme, farmers received implements like ploughs, tractors, planters, fuel, scotch carts, cultivators and portable fumigation tanks.

Manyiwa of Nemamwa village in Masvingo Province (interviewed on 18 April 2021) concurred that ZANU-PF offered a tangible empowerment drive to the youth. He revealed that the youth in his village have been receiving loans to boost piggery projects since 2008. For Manyiwa, handouts from ZANU-PF were not for campaigning purposes since they came throughout the year even when there were no elections, while people in his village heard of the MDC only during election time. However, giving food aid and other handouts throughout the year can be seen as pre-campaigning for forthcoming elections. Although the ruling party sometimes hijacked state resources to implement the supporting initiatives for these peasant economies, no other opposition political party has been able to support rural life to the same extent as ZANU-PF. Hence, the party which obstructed the opposition from doing the same became a darling of the rural populace before, during and after elections.

ZANU-PF empowerment policies also appealed to artisanal miners and the informal mining sector in rural areas. The land redistribution programme created avenues for small-scale gold miners who had access to land formerly controlled by monopolistic commercial white farmers and miners (Moyo 2011, p. 502). Having access to mining land, the artisanal miners further benefited from the government's relaxation of laws that prohibited illegal mining. Even in the presence of statutory instruments and laws which prohibited informal mining,

the ZANU-PF government sometimes cast a blind eye to the activities of the informal miners. In 2013 the government reversed its 2008 policy of clamping down on illegal mining (Raftopoulos 2013, p. 11), as efforts at the formalisation of the informal small-scale artisanal mining sector were under way. These supportive conditions to promote informal mining burnished the image of ZANU-PF as a party responsive to the people's needs. Spiegel (2017, p. 102) notes that ZANU-PF continues to have political dominance in mining districts such as Filabusi, Insiza, Umzingwani, Chegutu, Kadoma, Shamva and Mazoe. That dominance gave the party supporters a monopoly over mining claims. In order to safeguard their illicit artisanal mining livelihoods, rural miners voted consciously for ZANU-PF in the 2013 elections, as this was the only guarantee for the security and protection of their small mineral claims.

The concept of community-share ownership is another aspect introduced by the ruling party, which supported peasants in rural areas who as a result consciously preferred ZANU-PF in elections. Mugabe launched many community-share ownership schemes around the country. These schemes were prominent in the Midlands Province and other places along the great dyke. In an interview on 29 April 2021, war veteran Chipfunyise revealed that ZANU-PF was supporting them in the War Vets Act, a piece of legislation which will guarantee economic empowerment for the war vets in the mining and agriculture sectors. These empowerment schemes increased ZANU-PF's popularity and made it easier for the party's parliamentary candidates in mineral-rich areas to campaign for votes.

ZANU-PF has also played an important part in the educational sector for the benefit of the rural people. The government's rural education policy made education accessible at affordable fees for the peasants, compared to expensive urban education. Primary education in marginalised areas was mainly free, although parents paid levies in the form of a building fund and sports fee (Kanyongo 2005, p. 67). Parents were thus required to pay nominal fees and schools were not allowed to send fee defaulters away. Further, the Presidential Scholarship Programme, which offered disadvantaged youths from rural areas the opportunity to enrol in international universities, is also among the popular educational initiatives by the ZANU-PF government. Tanaka, a veterinary officer in Macheke confirmed on 18 April 2021 that she benefited from the War Vets' education scheme by joining the ZANU-PF War Vets' Children Association which had the responsibility of educating war veterans' children. She felt that her family was indebted to the scheme and the party since they had provided college school fees for her and her three siblings, after they had been orphaned at a tender age. There are not many opposition welfare programmes of a similar nature. Therefore, the neo-liberal rhetoric of opposition politics which does not believe in welfarism scares the peasant voters who end up supporting ZANU-PF to receive free social services.

In an interview on 29 April 2021, Mundawarara (an MDC supporter), explained and complained about the MDC's failure to use the gospel of empowerment to attract voters. Mundawarara believes that the name MDC speaks of democratic struggles, but does not encompass empowerment values in the way the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) opposition party in South Africa does. He argued that people do not 'eat' democracy but want livelihoods that emerge from economic empowerment. Hence, in order to appeal to the rural masses, the MDC party should focus not only on democracy but also on economic empowerment for economically disadvantaged people.

In the context of the benefits that have accrued to the rural populace and the relevance of ZANU-PF to a peasant agriculture-based economy, it can be argued that the majority of rural dwellers are those who have actually captured ZANU-PF and have been using the party to support their own agriculture-based livelihoods. Therefore, because the neoliberal urban dweller views ZANU-PF as a party of villains that failed to provide public amenities, rural dwellers hold it in high regard. In fact, some pro-opposition politicians, scholars and MDC supporters have universalised urban needs but have ignored the socio-economic needs of the peasantry who constitute almost 70% of Zimbabwe's population.

The Legacy of Liberation War on Voter Preferences

ZANU-PF is generally viewed as the party which untied the chains of colonialism from the rural dwellers, and the rural electorate voted for it because of the legacy of the liberation war. Most people in the rural areas participated directly in the liberation war. Although the urbanites took part indirectly and also directly through acts of arson, resistance and opposition to colonial rule, ZANU-PF conveniently and erroneously accuses urban dwellers of betrayal and of not having participated in the liberation struggle in the national interest. According to Rwodzi (2018), people who were not interested in joining the liberation struggle chose either to remain in urban environments or migrated to the urban areas. Because Zimbabwean elections were regarded as a product of nationalism which brought independence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012), the majority of residents in rural areas view ZANU-PF as the custodian of peace and liberty. Therefore, they consciously voted for ZANU-PF in elections, presumably in order to preserve their liberty.

Nationalist historians such as Bhebe (1999) and Ranger (1985) argue that the liberation struggle enjoyed popular support among the rural masses and was based on a socialist ideology whereby peasants voluntarily supported the liberation fighters. This partly explains the relationship between ZANU-PF, as the party which fought for liberation, and the rural population as a people who supported the struggle for liberation. During election campaigns, rural people

therefore felt intimidated by new candidates from opposition political formations who were not from their locality, believing that they were foreign agents. Thus, in the rural dwellers' view, external interference (real or perceived) would reverse the gains brought by the liberation struggle and independence. The MDC in particular was seen as externally funded and associated with foreign support; and it was alleged that the party wanted to bring back colonialism and violence in the rural areas which had experienced the worst horrors of war during the struggle for independence. Those voters with memories of the war constitute the majority of the elderly people who have retired to their rural homes. For instance, in the 2018 election, fewer than 20 000 elderly people resided in urban Harare and Bulawayo (ZEC b 2018). ZANU-PF presents itself as the custodian of the sovereignty of the country. In many rural quarters of Zimbabwe ZANU-PF has been viewed as such. However, neoliberal urban scholars and politicians sometimes fail to acknowledge the agency of rural people who were influenced by the war in making independent political choices and voting for a political party of their choice, in this case a party with war credentials.

ZANU-PF's communist characteristics during the liberation struggle blended in well with the peasantry's organisational structures characteristic of Zimbabwe's rural communities, and the party continued to use communist structures after the war as a rallying point for elections. The party's socialist structures seem to incorporate every individual from the grassroots level to the party executive. The grassroots structures, created during the liberation struggle, still existed in post-colonial rural communities in Zimbabwe where ZANU-PF continued to dominate and used these structures for rural political indoctrination. Socialist structures which start from village level 'cells' promote participation of every individual in the political processes. This is an advantage ZANU-PF has enjoyed in the rural areas over the opposition MDC and other opposition parties since 1980.

The MDC did not have such effective structures. Raftopoulos (2013, p. 15) concurs by arguing that undeveloped organisational structures were some of the major weaknesses of the MDC. Opposition political parties in Zimbabwe have generally failed to create grassroots structures in rural areas; hence, they were not guaranteed support from rural voters. In 2020 the MDC-Alliance (MDC-A) leader, Nelson Chamisa, admitted that his party was failing to attract the rural voter and therefore the MDC-A was concentrating on luring the urban voter (Mhlanga 2020).

In the main, the MDC did not consider rural politics to be different from urban politics where ideologies are shared through rallies. In rural areas politics is intertwined with societal structures and takes place in everyday life. This partly explains ZANU-PF's appeal in the rural areas. For some of the country's rural

areas, ZANU-PF has become more a way of life than a political party. Because of the party's grassroots structures established during the liberation war, rural voters either consciously voted for, or felt politically obligated to vote for ZANU-PF, which appealed to their liberation consciousness. In instances when rural people were involved in election violence, they were conscious of their actions.

Violence Consciousness

ZANU-PF has been indisputably involved in election violence and there is overwhelming statistical evidence (in Figure 1 below) to illustrate the violent history of the party. Scholars such as Kriger (2013) have cited violence as being imposed by ZANU-PF on the masses as an election-winning strategy; but Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012) explains how historical experiences have inculcated a violent culture among rural voters. He observes that colonialism and the liberation struggle ushered in a violent tradition among Zimbabweans. Violence became inherent in the culture and was unleashed during elections to settle feuds and even old scores within the society.

In an interview on 12 October 2020 in Chiota communal lands, Nyamasvisva, a school security guard, spoke of how he enjoyed beating up people from neighbouring villages, and at the same time revenging inter-family feuds which spanned decades. In a study of violence in rural areas, Jonga (2013) indicates that rural poverty and stratification were major drivers of violence. According to Jonga, it seems that the rural poor were jealous of the lives of those better-off than themselves, and this translated into violence and the destruction of property during elections. The ordinary, poor villagers sometimes killed friends and family for the sake of money while at other times they were interested in looting (Jonga 2013). The perpetrators of violence often enjoyed impunity through presidential pardons and amnesties. Kriger (2005) cites an example where on 6 October 2000, the Government of Zimbabwe gazetted an amnesty for politically motivated crimes.

The majority of the perpetrators of violence in Zimbabwe are non-state actors (51.2%), and supporters of ZANU-PF, as well as war veterans (RAU 2021). State actors, the police (ZRP), the army (ZNA), and the intelligence service (CIO) allegedly also account for a substantial number of the perpetrators (22.7%) according to RAU (2021). Thus, the empirical evidence over the period from 1998 to 2018 (illustrated in Figure 1) supports the claim that Zimbabwe sometimes experiences violence during elections. However, it is important to stress that this must be seen in the context of a prolonged struggle for political power between the two main political parties, ZANU-PF and the MDC.

Province	Violence %
Bulawayo	5.4
Harare	39.4
Manicaland	10.2
Mashonaland Central	9.2
Mashonaland East	10.1
Mashonaland West	9.5
Masvingo	5.3
Matabeleland North	2
Matabeleland South	1.5
Midlands	7.4

Source: RAU (2021)

Figure 1: Frequency of violent events by province in Zimbabwe's elections, 1998 to 2018

The startling finding in Figure 1 is the high frequency of violent events in Harare over the 20-year period. Not even the combined frequencies (28.8%) of the three Mashonaland Provinces, anecdotally seen as the most violent during elections, approach the frequency of violations in Harare. In addition, the frequency of events in the southern half of the country – Bulawayo, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South – is very low, less than 9% of the total. However, the traditional heartland of ZANU-PF support, Manicaland, and the three Mashonaland Provinces, Masvingo and the Midlands, jointly exceed Harare, by 52% as opposed to 39%.

ZANU-PF youths and war veterans were among the groups associated with violence during election times, but they were pardoned. Tatenda, a school leaver and a farmer in Pasipamire Village in Chiota, was interviewed on 15 July. He laughed when looking back at how he enjoyed bullying and beating his former teachers during the 2008 elections as a form of revenge for the punishment they had given him for being mischievous at school. His account fits in well with Kriger's assertion that the unemployed youth were the leading perpetrators of violence during the 2000 elections. This shows that most of the perpetrators of political violence were not being used by ZANU-PF against their will, but consciously or knowingly joined the ZANU-PF militia to satisfy their own violent tendencies, without facing any legal consequences.

Low-level and poor quality education has also been associated with violence in the rural areas. According to Jonga (2013), many of the people involved in violence in Mutoko and Uzumba-Maramba-Pfungwe did not even finish primary school, and this group was the most vicious. It has been argued therefore that such villagers preferred ZANU-PF because it gave them the opportunity to unleash violence on their adversaries during election time without facing any consequences. Their electoral consciousness and voting preferences in Zimbabwe's elections are thus found to tilt towards a party some people perceived to offer them protection whenever they needed it.

Contrary to these sentiments, other people in rural areas believed that violence originated in the MDC and saw their mandate being to defend their area against the MDC's allegedly violent characteristics and corruption. In an interview on 18 April 2021, Manyiwa and Takabvirakare of Masvingo pointed out that the MDC is known for violence and corruption in Harare, and villagers did not want members of MDC to export this to their rural homes. They blamed the MDC for poor living conditions in urban centres and vowed that they would do whatever was necessary to keep the malign influence of the MDC away from their territories. Although Manyiwa and Takabvirakare's perception of the MDC might have been influenced by the state-controlled media, the interview revealed that the two interviewees were conscious of what they did and did not want in their community.

CONCLUSION

The article concludes that the rural peasants were neither as passive or captured as they had been portrayed by anti-ZANU-PF liberal scholars and opposition political sympathisers. It claims that pro-opposition scholarship has been blinded by urban bias and has overlooked what drives the rural populace and makes them blend in with ZANU-PF. There seems to be a reciprocal gesture in which rural political actors obtain their needs from ZANU-PF and in turn feel obliged to vote for the party in elections. In a country beset by an unabating economic crisis, it can be hard to understand why ZANU-PF continued to win elections. Although the party is notorious for allegedly using unorthodox strategies to win elections, it is important to know that 67% of the population in Zimbabwe consists of peasant economies which require little in the form of modern support from the government. Hence, not every rural citizen is as aggrieved as the urban dweller.

Rather than viewing the rural voter as being captured by ZANU-PF, this article thus views rural voters as having captured ZANU-PF to sustain their peasant agrarian economies. Radical peasants, for example, forced the ZANU-PF government to concede to the land reform programme and relax mining laws to favour artisanal miners. In this case, ZANU-PF can be viewed as a captive of the

rural voters. Clearly, most ZANU-PF structures and policies favoured the rural populace by distributing free farming inputs (e.g., seed and fertilizer) and other social services like education. People in the rural areas also enjoy community share ownership schemes where big mines set aside financial resources which are enjoyed by communities around them, although these are sometimes looted. Since most of the mines are in the rural areas, it is the rural residents who benefit the most and thus they have been voting for ZANU-PF in elections between 1980 and 2018.

The paper has demonstrated that numerous factors influence voter preferences in Zimbabwe, but to a certain extent violence also plays a part. Some rural residents hide behind ZANU-PF to unleash violence and enjoy amnesty after committing atrocities during election periods. The article thus argues that the perpetrators of violence in rural areas are always conscious of their actions and voting preferences. The rural population apparently uses ZANU-PF to protect the benefits they have received related to peasant livelihoods and entitlements. Therefore, as the majority in Zimbabwe, rural dwellers both reflect and support the continued victory of ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe's elections, using their strong grassroots social structures. In contrast, the absence of grassroots social structures in the MDC and the lack of support in other parties for peasant agriculture is behind the failure of opposition political parties to gain support and make political inroads in the rural areas. Although it is difficult for the opposition parties to penetrate the rural areas due to political violence, their urban bias has contributed to their loss in previous elections in Zimbabwe. However, rural electorate consciousness and preference for the ruling party, regardless of violence, is behind the success of ZANU-PF in the rural electoral constituencies, as urban voting preferences during elections tend to favour the opposition.

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