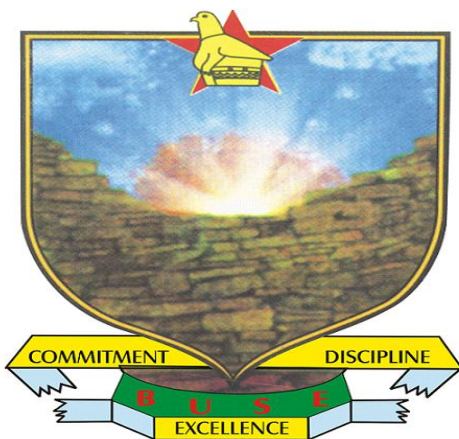**BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION**

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

Possibility of Holding Credible Elections in African Countries. A Case Study of Zimbabwe

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the possibility of holding credible elections in Zimbabwe, a pressing issue in the context of democratic governance in Africa. The study sought to examine the possibilities of holding credible elections in Zimbabwe. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, this study employed in-depth interviews and semi-structured questionnaires to gather insights from various stakeholders, including politicians, civil society representatives, and voters. Key findings reveal that the establishment of an independent electoral commission is crucial for enhancing electoral integrity. Respondents emphasized the need for transparency, effective monitoring by international observers, and media freedom to foster an informed electorate. However, significant challenges persist, including political violence, voter intimidation, and systemic bias within the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), which erodes public trust. The study concludes that while there are opportunities for credible elections in Zimbabwe, substantial reforms are necessary. These reforms should focus on enhancing the independence of electoral institutions, ensuring fair media coverage, and promoting comprehensive voter education initiatives. Recommendations include establishing a fully independent electoral commission to oversee elections, enacting laws to protect against political violence and voter intimidation, and increasing civil society engagement in voter education. Additionally, promoting media independence and fostering a culture of political pluralism are essential for creating a fair electoral landscape.
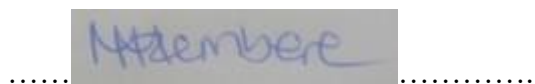
DECLARATION FORM

I, Sharon Nyamadzawo (B210061B), hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own research and study, except to the extent indicated in the acknowledgments and references included in the body of the paper, and that it has not been submitted in part or in full for any other degree to any other university.
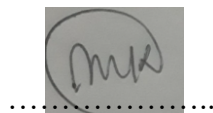
Sharon Nyamadzawo　　　…….………..

Student Name　　　　　**Signature**

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Supervisor　　　　　**Signature**

Dr. Kurebwa　　　　　………………..

Chairperson　　　　　**Signature**

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my son Ryan Muzika

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AU - African Union

CCC - Citizens Coalition for Change

ERC - Election Resource Centre

EU - European Union

SADC - Southern African Development Community

UNDP - United Nations Development Programme

ZANU-PF - Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front

ZEC - Zimbabwe Electoral Commission

ZESN - Zimbabwe Election Support Network

ZHRA - Zimbabwe Human Rights Association

ZLHR - Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Elections serve as a cornerstone of democratic governance worldwide. They empower individuals to select their representatives and shape public policy. However, the structure and conduct of these electoral processes differ widely across nations and regions. They are shaped by distinct political frameworks, cultural traditions, and institutional arrangements. In some regions there is worrying trend of autocratization where democratic norms are eroded and elections become less free and fair. This shift undermine public trust in electoral processes and lead to increased political instability. According (Wiliamsom 2020) the global landscape of elections is increasingly complex, marked by both advancements in democratic practices and challenges that threaten electoral integrity and fairness

American countries, particularly in Latin America, the holding of credible elections is shaped by political and economic factors. Many nations in the region have made stride toward democratic governance. Many countries in Latin America experience political polarization which undermine the electoral process (Lindberg 2019). For instance in some nations there are concerns about whether political environment is conducive to hold credible elections ,as divisions can lead to conflicts and disputes over election outcome .

In Africa the possibility of holding credible elections depends on governance structures and the commitment of both local and international stakeholders. Due to political instability, many African countries are facing challenges in organizing credible elections for example Mali and Sudan (Omondi, 2021). UN official statements indicated that south Sudan is not prepared

to conduct credible elections to ongoing instability and governance issues (Omondi, 2021). While African countries are struggling to hold credible elections, there are numerous opportunity for holding credible elections

In the Zimbabwean situation, the holding of credible elections remains a concern this is because, since its independence in 1980 have been heavily contested and marred by allegations of vote rigging. The country's electoral processes are marred by systematic issues that undermine their integrity like the failure to implement necessary legal and electoral reforms has been indicated as a barrier to credible elections (ZESN, 2023). The lack of electoral reform has persisted over the years, contributing to a political environment where the credibility of elections is questioned (Bogaards 2013). It is a worrying issues to realize that most elections in African countries end up being contested in court of law, blaming one party of rigging and cheating in their favor for the ruling party to remain in power.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

African countries, Zimbabwe included experience electoral violence during pre and post elections. Since Zimbabwe's inaugural elections in 1980, the electoral landscape has been consistently marred by political unrest, with campaigns and post-election periods frequently accompanied by violence and fatalities (Kriger, 2005). Zimbabwe face a number of challenges in ensuring the credibility of its elections. These challenges include state media bias, voter intimidation, and manipulation of voter's rolls, voter suppression and limited access to polling stations (Bingisai, 2023). Therefore holding credible elections become a challenge across African countries. The end result is that elections end up contested in the court of law with other parties blaming one party for rigging and cheating and this lead to mass killing of electorates (ZESN, 2023). Therefore this research aims to explore challenges that hinder the

credibility of elections as well as providing possible measures on how to hold credible elections in Zimbabwe.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to study the possibility of holding credible elections in African countries, using Zimbabwe as a case study.

1.4 Objective of the Study

- To examine the possibilities of holding credible elections in Zimbabwe

- To assess the challenges that hinder the conducting of credible elections in Zimbabwe

- To establish possible measures to hold credible elections in Zimbabwe

1.5 Research Questions

- What are the possibilities of holding credible elections in Zimbabwe?

- How is holding of credible hindered in Zimbabwe ?

- What possible measures can Zimbabwe put in place to hold credible elections?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the obstacles and prospects for strengthening Zimbabwe's electoral processes, with a focus on promoting free, fair, and transparent elections. It also underscores the critical role of institutional frameworks—particularly electoral management bodies such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission—in either advancing or impeding inclusivity and the overall credibility of electoral outcomes.

1.7 Assumptions of the Study

The research assumes that there are chances of holding credible elections in Zimbabwe.

This study also assumes that Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and Electoral Observers are aware of the factors that undermine the integrity of electoral processes in Zimbabwe.

1.8 Delimitation of the Study

This study explored the feasibility of conducting credible elections across African contexts, with Zimbabwe serving as the focal case study. The study focused on the relevant stakeholders like political activist, political candidate, electoral observers, Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and electorate. Reference was also given to other African countries with the possibility of holding credible elections such as Zambia, Malawi and others.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

The research was politically sensitive, thus the study faces some challenges such as reluctance of participants to share their views or experiences. Also bias in sources was another challenge the research faces particularly if the sources are aligned with specific agendas.

1.10 Definition of Key Terms

Elections: According to Bogaards (2013), elections constitute a structured collective decision-making mechanism by which citizens designate individuals to occupy positions of public authority.

Credible elections: Lindberg (2019) defines them as elections marked by key democratic principles, including inclusivity, transparency, accountability, and genuine political competition.

Democracy: Williamson (2020) describes democracy as a governance structure in which authority originates from the populace, who are granted the liberty to exercise that power autonomously.

Accountability: Refers to the obligation or willingness of an individual or organization to accept responsibility for their actions and decisions (Kriger, 2005).

1.11 Chapter outline

Chapter 1: This chapter include background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, objectives, research questions, significant of the study ,assumptions, delimitation and limitation of the study as well as definition of key terms

Chapter 2: This chapter covers literature review and theoretical framework that is social contract theory and democratic theory. The chapter also include successful examples of African countries holding credible elections, factors contributing to credible elections, challenges in conducting credible elections in Zimbabwe, measures to help Zimbabwe hold credible elections ,research gap as well as chapter summary.

Chapter 3: The chapter include research philosophy, methodology, research design, population and sample, sampling method, data collection methods, data presentation and ethical consideration.

Chapter 4: The chapter shares data presentation, analysis and discussions of findings.

Chapter 5:The chapter include summary of the study, conclusions, recomendations as well as areas for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the key determinants affecting the feasibility of conducting credible elections in Zimbabwe, a country navigating a politically intricate terrain shaped by enduring historical complexities. Drawing on an extensive literature review and theoretical grounding, it engages with foundational concepts such as social contract theory and democratic theory to emphasize the role of citizen engagement and governmental accountability in legitimizing political authority. The analysis extends to broader African and Southern African contexts, illuminating region-specific electoral challenges. By examining exemplary democratic practices and unpacking persistent barriers, including electoral violence, partisan media coverage, and compromised institutional autonomy, the chapter offers a nuanced exploration of the forces that influence electoral integrity within Zimbabwe.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Social Contract Theory

Social contract theory interrogates the foundational premises underpinning the legitimacy of political authority and the reciprocal relationship between the state and its citizens. As stated by Maphunye (2016) it posits that governments derive their authority from an implicit agreement among the governed, who consent to relinquish some personal freedoms in exchange for protection. This theory has been promoted by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Maphunye, 2016). These all concur that the social contract is a model for governance. In the context of elections, social contract theory emphasises the value

of citizen participation as a means of legitimizing authority (Dedi et al., 2023). It stipulates that for a government to be considered legitimate, it must reflect the will of the people and be accountable to them (Dedi et al., 2023). Elections serve as a critical mechanism through which the social contract is enacted, allowing citizens to express their consent or dissent regarding the policies and direction of their government (Dedi et al., 2023).

2.2.2 Democratic Theory

Democratic theory is a framework that examines the principles and practices of democracy, emphasizing the role of citizen participation, equality, and the protection of individual rights. According to Schultz (2022) it asserts that a legitimate government is one that derives its authority from the consent of the governed. Schultz (2022) further asserts that the democratic theory advocates for mechanisms that ensure accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to the needs of the populace. As stated by Converse (2018) key proponents of democratic theory include thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Robert Dahl. Converse (2018) asserts that the theory explores various dimensions of democracy, including representative governance, deliberative democracy, and participatory democracy. In relation to elections, democratic theory underscores the importance of free and fair electoral processes as a cornerstone of democracy (Schultz, 2022). Elections are viewed as vital tools for enabling citizens to choose their representatives and influence governmental policies, thereby reinforcing the idea that political power should reside with the people (Schultz, 2022). This theory also highlights the necessity of protecting electoral integrity to uphold the principles of democracy and ensure that the political system remains responsive to the electorate's will.

2.3 African Context

Across Africa, the conduct of elections has faced significant challenges that undermine the democratic process and the legitimacy of outcomes. Omondi (2021) asserts that one of the foremost issues is political instability, which plagues many African Union (AU) member states. In several regions, political unrest can escalate into election-related violence, creating an environment of fear and intimidation that discourages voter participation (Omondi, 2021). Such unrest often leads to disputes over results, further complicating the political landscape and eroding public trust in governance (Omondi, 2021). Ndlela and Mano (2020) concur that there is a lack of institutional independence among electoral commissions across various African countries. Ndlela and Mano (2020) further share that in many countries, these bodies operate under considerable influence from the government and this results in biased processes that favour incumbents. This lack of autonomy severely hampers the capacity of electoral commissions to conduct electionscredibly, as they are pressured to manipulate outcomes or ignore electoral irregularities (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). Furthermore, Mathe (2020) asserts that corruption and malpractice are pervasive issues that significantly undermine the integrity of elections across the continent. Instances of vote-buying, manipulation of voter rolls and intimidation of voters are all common (Mathe, 2020). This creates a skewed electoral environment where the voice of the electorate is drowned out by illicit practices. Corruption distorts the electoral process and also fosters a culture of impunity, where those in power feel emboldened to engage in unethical behaviour without fear of repercussions (Mathe, 2020). The combination of these factors creates a daunting landscape for elections in Africa. As a result, the promise of democracy remains unfulfilled in many regions, where the fundamental rights of citizens to participate in governance are continually compromised.

2.3.1 Successful Examples of African countries holding credible elections

It is also noteworthy that there some African countries that have conducted elections that are largely considered credible by the international community. Successful examples of democratic elections in Africa highlight the potential for positive change when political stability and institutional integrity align. According to Kumah-Abiwu and Darkwa (2020) Ghana is one of the notable exceptions. It is known for its stable political environment as it has conducted multiple credible elections. The country's electoral authority operates with a degree of independence, ensuring that electoral processes are transparent and fairly administered (Kumah-Abiwu & Darkwa, 2020). This reliability has earned Ghana respect within the African Union (AU) and serves as an inspiration for other nations striving for democratic governance (Kumah-Abiwu & Darkwa, 2020). Similarly, Tunisia has made remarkable progress since the Arab Spring, which catalysed a wave of change across the region (Grewal, 2021). The country has successfully established democratic institutions and has conducted several credible elections. Tunisia's commitment to political reform and civic engagement has fostered an environment where citizens actively participate in the electoral process (Grewal, 2021). The establishment of a democratic framework has allowed for peaceful transitions of power, setting a precedent for other nations in the region.

2.3.2 SADC Context

The SADC faces various challenges regarding electoral processes, primarily due to weak electoral institutions and ongoing political tensions (Sithole, 2023). In several member states, electoral management bodies often lack the autonomy and capacity to conduct unbiased elections (Sithole, 2023). This deficiency results in biased electoral processes that favour incumbents, undermining the integrity of democratic practices. Deleglise (2021) asserts that the lack of autonomy in these institutions can lead to manipulation of election outcomes.

Moreover, political tensions and rivalries among parties in many SADC countries exacerbate these issues (Deleglise, 2021). During election periods, these rivalries can escalate into violence and unrest, creating an environment of fear that discourages voter turnout and engagement (Deleglise, 2021). Such political instability disrupts the electoral process. It also poses significant risks to the wellbeing of citizens and other stakeholders alike (Sithole, 2023). The combination of weak electoral institutions and heightened political tensions creates a challenging landscape for democracy in the SADC region. This highlights the urgent need for reforms that promote institutional independence, enhance capacity, and foster a culture of peaceful political competition.

2.3.3 Successful examples of SADC countries holding credible elections.

There have been notable examples within SADC. Melber (2022) asserts that Namibia is renowned for its transparent electoral processes, having successfully conducted credible elections since its independence. Melber (2022) asserts that the country's electoral management body operates with a high degree of independence, ensuring that elections are fair and reflective of the electorate's will. This commitment to transparency and accountability has fostered a political environment where citizens largely trust the democratic process, enhancing Namibia's stability and governance (Melber, 2022). Similarly, Botswana consistently receives praise for its electoral integrity. The nation has maintained a reputation as a model of democratic governance in Africa (Seabo, 2023). Botswana's political system allows for peaceful transfer of power, and its electoral framework ensures that all parties can compete on an equitable basis (Seabo, 2023). The country's ethical approach has contributed to notable levels of political stability and active civic participation.

2.4 Factors Contributing to Credible Elections in Zimbabwe

2.4.1 Election Observer Missions

Credible elections in Zimbabwe are influenced by several key factors. One of which is the active participation of election observers. Bingisai (2023) asserts that the inclusion of both domestic and international observers plays a crucial role in enhancing the integrity of the election process. These observers are tasked with monitoring various aspects of the elections, including the conduct of electoral officials, the fairness of the campaign environment, and the overall electoral process (ZESN, 2023). Bingisai (2023) highlights that their presence serves to deter potential malpractices and instills confidence among voters regarding the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes. Notable organizations, such as the Carter Center, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), and the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), have been instrumental in observing elections in Zimbabwe (ZESN, 2023). According to Carter Center (2024) these missions deploy trained observers to various polling stations across the country to assess the electoral process firsthand. Bingisai (2023) notes that they monitor the adherence to electoral laws and regulations, ensuring that the rights of voters are protected and that the voting process is conducted fairly and without intimidation. For instance, the Carter Center typically assesses the pre-election environment, observing campaign activities and the media landscape to ensure that all candidates have an equal opportunity to present their platforms (ZESN, 2023). The ZESN, a local organization, often engages in voter education initiatives while simultaneously monitoring the conduct of the elections, focusing on issues such as voter accessibility and the voter registration process (ZESN, 2023). Meanwhile, the EU EOM brings a comprehensive approach, evaluating not only the voting process but also the broader political context, including the legal framework governing elections (Bingisai, 2023).

2.4.2 Civil Society

Civil society are an integral part to the holding of credible elections in Zimbabwe by promoting human rights, promoting transparency, and monitoring the electoral process. Ndakaripa (2023) asserts that these organizations serve as watchdogs, actively reporting humanitarian abuses and making sure the voices of the populace are heard. Ndakaripa (2023) highlights that their advocacy efforts are meant to highlight issues related to electoral violence, voter intimidation, and other human rights violations that may occur during election periods. They also document and report on instances of humanitarian abuses. Entities such as the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZHRA) and the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) engage in meticulous monitoring of human rights conditions, particularly during elections (Ndakaripa, 2023). They gather testimonies from affected individuals and compile reports that detail instances of violence, harassment, or discrimination. Madziyauswa (2024) notes that these reports are often presented to both local and international bodies, raising awareness of the situation in Zimbabwe and calling for accountability from those responsible. In addition to reporting abuses, civil society organizations actively lobby for the rights of citizens, advocating for reforms that ensure a fair electoral process (Madziyauswa, 2024). They engage in campaigns aimed at raising public awareness about electoral practices and the significance of participation in the democratic process. For example, the Election Resource Centre (ERC) conducts voter education initiatives equip citizens with the requisite knowledge and capacities to assert and exercise their rights in an informed way (Madziyauswa, 2024). This includes information on how to register to vote, understand election procedures, and recognize their rights on election day. Moreover, civil society groups often collaborate with international organizations and local communities to amplify their voices.

2.4.3 Civic Education

Civic education constitutes a foundational mechanism for enhancing informed voter participation in Zimbabwe. As Mhuru (2023) observes, a range of initiatives have been implemented to raise public awareness regarding citizens' rights, the electoral framework, and the broader significance of civic engagement. Notably, political actors such as ZANU-PF and the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) have taken active roles in these efforts, facilitating workshops and conducting community outreach to mobilize and educate the electorate. These programs serve not only to disseminate information about party platforms and electoral procedures but also to underscore the transformative potential of voting in shaping national governance and policy trajectories (Mhuru, 2023). In addition to political parties, several organizations are dedicated to providing comprehensive election education. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) is one such organization that focuses on empowering voters through various educational campaigns. ZESN conducts voter education sessions, distributes informative materials, and uses media platforms to reach a broader audience (ZESN, 2023). The Carter Center (2024) asserts that their efforts ensure that voters understand the registration process, polling procedures, and the importance of participating in elections. Another notable organization is the Election Resource Centre (ERC), which also engages in extensive voter education programs. The ERC focuses on educating citizens about their electoral rights and responsibilities, helping them navigate the complexities of the electoral process (Carter Center, 2024). They often conduct community meetings and utilize social media to spread awareness about upcoming elections, registration deadlines, and how to report any electoral irregularities (Carter Center, 2024). Furthermore, grassroots organizations and community-based groups contribute to civic education by holding localized workshops and seminars. These initiatives aim to empower marginalized communities, ensuring that all citizens have access to the information they need to participate effectively in the democratic process.

2.4.4 Engagement of Youth and Marginalized Groups

The engagement of youth and marginalized groups is a critical component in ensuring credible elections in Zimbabwe. Historically, as argued by Mutasa and Ndawana (2024) these demographics have faced barriers to political participation, which can undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process. By actively including youth and marginalized communities, the electoral landscape becomes more representative and reflective of the broader society. Mutukura (2019) states that organizations like the Youth Agenda Trust and the National Youth Development Trust focus on empowering young voters through educational programs that highlight their electoral rights and responsibilities. Such initiatives cultivate a sense of democratic ownership among youth, fostering their agency and incentivizing active participation in electoral processes. Additionally, grassroots organizations such as the Zimbabwe Community Development Trust work to engage marginalized groups, ensuring that their voices are heard in political discussions (Mutukura, 2019). These organizations often conduct workshops and community meetings to educate individuals about the electoral process, voter registration, and the importance of civic engagement. By addressing the specific challenges faced by these groups, such as economic barriers or social stigmas, these initiatives promote inclusivity and encourage a broader spectrum of participation in elections. Furthermore, the involvement of international actors, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), provides additional support for initiatives aimed at engaging youth and marginalized communities (Masuku, 2019). The UNDP often collaborates with local partners to implement programs that promote democratic governance and electoral participation (Masuku, 2019). Such collaborations enhance the capacity of local organizations and also lend credibility to their efforts.

2.5 Challenges in Conducting Credible Elections in Zimbabwe

2.5.1 Lack of Independent Electoral Commission

A persistent impediment to the credibility of elections in Zimbabwe is the perceived lack of institutional independence within the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). As Mwonzora (2023) contends, ZEC is frequently viewed as being subject to undue influence from the ruling party, thereby compromising its capacity to administer elections impartially. This perceived lack of autonomy raises substantive concerns regarding the integrity of the electoral process, as commission decisions may disproportionately benefit incumbents rather than authentically representing the electorate's will. Mwonzora (2023) further states that the ZEC's vulnerability to political pressure manifests in various ways, such as biased voter registration processes, uneven enforcement of electoral laws, and inadequate responses to complaints regarding electoral irregularities. Mapuweyi (2024) asserts that the ZEC has been slow to act on reports of voter intimidation or irregularities at polling stations, leading to public distrust in its capacity to manage elections impartially. Moreover, the appointments of ZEC officials are often seen as politically motivated, with members chosen based on their affiliations rather than their qualifications or commitment to electoral integrity (Mapuweyi, 2024). This perception is compounded when political parties, particularly those in power, exert influence over the commission's operations, thereby compromising its independence. Organizations like the Election Resource Centre (ERC) have highlighted these issues, calling for reforms that enhance the ZEC's autonomy and accountability (Mapuweyi, 2024). External monitoring bodies, including representatives from the African Union and the SADC, have also noted the need for a more independent conduction of elections (ZESN, 2023). These reports emphasize that without a neutral body overseeing the electoral process, the legitimacy of elections in Zimbabwe remains in question.

2.5.2 Imbalanced Media Representation

One of the critical challenges undermining credible elections in Zimbabwe is the imbalance in media coverage afforded to political parties, particularly the ruling party, ZANU-PF. Research by Carter Center (2024) indicates that ZANU-PF receives approximately 65% of media coverage from public broadcasters, which significantly skews the portrayal of the political landscape and limits the visibility of opposition parties. This disproportionate coverage creates an uneven playing field, where the ruling party can dominate the narrative, thereby influencing public perception and voter behavior. Matsilele and Ruhanya (2024) highlights that public broadcasters, such as ZBC (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation), are state-controlled entities that prioritize ZANU-PF's messaging while marginalizing opposition voices. This bias is evident during election periods when ZBC predominantly features ZANU-PF events, policies, and candidates, while opposition parties struggle to secure airtime or fair representation. As a result, voters may be less informed about the policies and platforms of opposition parties, which hampers their ability to make informed choices at the ballot box (Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2024). The lack of balanced media coverage extends beyond public broadcasters to other media outlets as well. Carter Center (2024) asserts that many private media organizations face intimidation, censorship, or restrictions that discourage them from providing equitable coverage of opposition parties. Therefore, some journalists self-censor and avoid reporting on issues related to the opposition due to fears of reprisal or legal action, further perpetuating a cycle of biased reporting (ZESN, 2023). Organizations such as the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) have documented these disparities and advocated for media reforms that promote fairness and impartiality in coverage (ZESN, 2023). They emphasize the need for a diverse media landscape that allows various political voices to be heard. Without such reforms, the existing media environment continues to favor the ruling party, undermining the principles of democracy and free expression.

2.5.3 Electoral Violence

Zimbabwe faces significant challenges related to electoral violence, which severely undermines the credibility of its democratic processes. The history of political violence has created a climate of fear that impacts voter participation and the overall integrity of elections. Mautsi et al. (2024) in the 2018 elections, tensions escalated dramatically, particularly after the results were announced. Supporters of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) protested against what they claimed were irregularities. In response, the military was deployed, leading to violent clashes in the streets of Harare. Reports indicated that at least six people were killed, and many more were injured as security forces used live ammunition to disperse crowds (Mautsi et al., 2024). This violence suppressed dissent and also instilled fear among citizens (Mautsi et al., 2024). Mapuweyi (2024) underscores that the post-2018 electoral landscape in Zimbabwe reveals a pressing imperative for institutional reforms aimed at dismantling entrenched patterns of political violence and impunity. In the 2023 elections, and the pattern of electoral violence continued. As political tensions heightened in the lead-up to the elections, incidents of intimidation and harassment were reported, particularly targeting CCC supporters (Mapuweyi, 2024). Gwanzura (2024) reports that during the campaign period, opposition rallies were often disrupted by ZANU-PF supporters, who employed aggressive tactics to intimidate opposition members and stifle dissenting voices. Reports surfaced of violence against opposition candidates, including assaults and threats, aimed at undermining their campaigns (Gwanzura, 2024). The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission documented numerous cases of electoral violence, raising alarms over the deteriorating situation (ZESN, 2023).

2.5.4 Irregularities, and Allegations of Fraudulent Results

Irregularities and allegations of fraud have plagued Zimbabwe's electoral processes, significantly undermining public confidence in the integrity of its elections. Zamchiya (2024) asserts that various elections in Zimbabwe have been marred by widespread claims of rigging, particularly surrounding the presidential results. As an example, in 2018, the opposition, led by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), accused the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) of manipulating the votes at the behest of the ruling party, ZANU-PF (Zamchiya, 2024). Allegations included discrepancies between the number of votes cast and the final tally, with the MDC asserting that their nominee, Nelson Chamisa, had won the election (Zamchiya, 2024). Despite these claims, the ZEC announced Emmerson Mnangagwa as the winner, leading to protests and violent clashes in Harare, where security forces responded harshly to demonstrators. The situation in the 2023 elections mirrored these concerns, as accusations of rigging resurfaced (Zamchiya, 2024). Makonye (2024) reports that the run-up to the elections was fraught with allegations of voter suppression, including the intimidation of opposition supporters and irregularities in the voter registration process. Many citizens reported being unable to verify their registration status or faced barriers when attempting to register (Makone, 2024). Following the elections, the MDC again contested the results, claiming that the ZEC had failed to provide transparency in the vote-counting process. Observers noted that the commission's lack of responsiveness to these allegations further fueled suspicions of electoral malpractice (Makonye, 2024). The contested results have led to a cyclical pattern of political unrest in Zimbabwe. The unresolved allegations of electoral irregularities, coupled with widespread perceptions of partisan bias within the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), have substantially undermined public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

2.5.5 Partisan Traditional Leadership in Zimbabwe

Partisan traditional leadership has emerged as a significant challenge in Zimbabwe's political landscape, especially in relation to elections. Rwodzi (2024) asserts that traditional leaders, such as chiefs and village heads, hold considerable influence over their communities as they are mediators and custodians of cultural norms. However, in recent years, many of these leaders have aligned themselves with the ruling party, ZANU-PF, compromising their impartiality and undermining the democratic process (Rwodzi, 2024). This alignment has manifested in various ways, particularly during elections. Traditional leaders are often seen mobilizing support for ZANU-PF, using their authority to sway voters (Rwodzi, 2024). Mazibuko and Thebe (2024) assert that they coerce community members into attending party rallies, endorsing ZANU-PF candidates, or even discouraging support for opposition parties. Such actions violate the principles of neutrality expected from traditional leaders and also create an environment of fear and intimidation for those who may wish to vote against the ruling party (Mazibuko & Thebe, 2024). During various elections, reports indicated that traditional leaders have been involved in voter intimidation tactics, urging their subjects to vote for ZANU-PF under the threat of losing access to resources or traditional land (Mazibuko & Thebe, 2024). This partisanship erodes the trust that communities place in their leaders, as many citizens begin to view them as extensions of the political party rather than as impartial figures.

2.5.6 Partisan Distribution of State Resources

Partisan distribution of resources in Zimbabwe has been a persistent issue, significantly impacting the political landscape and the dynamics of electoral competition. Sithole (2024) asserts that aid and campaign resources have often been allocated along political party lines, with the supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party receiving preferential treatment. This practice

undermines the principles of fairness and equality. In many instances, government programs, humanitarian aid, and development resources have been strategically directed to areas viewed as ZANU-PF strongholds (Sithole, 2024). Communities openly support the ruling party are more likely to receive government assistance, including food aid, infrastructure development, and social services (Sithole, 2024). Conversely, opposition strongholds frequently experience neglect or delayed access to these resources, creating a stark disparity that reinforces political loyalty through material incentives (Maringira, 2024). Additionally, during election campaigns, the distribution of campaign resources such as funding, promotional materials, and logistical support has heavily favored ZANU-PF candidates (Maringira, 2024). This advantage allows the ruling party to dominate the political narrative, engage in more extensive outreach, and secure greater visibility among voters. The opposition parties, often constrained by limited resources and lack of access to state media, struggle to compete effectively, resulting in an uneven electoral playing field (Moyo, 2024). The implications of this partisan resource distribution are profound. It fosters a culture of patronage, where citizens may feel compelled to align with ZANU-PF to access basic services and support (Moyo, 2024).

2.5.7 Irregularities in the Voter's Roll in Zimbabwe

Concerns regarding the accuracy of the voter's roll in Zimbabwe have been a longstanding issue. Bandama (2024) asserts that allegations of irregularities have frequently surfaced, highlighting problems such as the inclusion of deceased individuals and duplicated names. Bandama (2024) emphasizes that such inconsistencies erode trust in the electoral framework and simultaneously open avenues for potential manipulation and electoral malpractice. The presence of deceased individuals on the voter's roll, can lead to questions about the legitimacy of votes cast. This situation raises fears that such names could be exploited to cast illegal votes, thereby skewing election outcomes (Bandama, 2024). Additionally,

reports of duplicated names on the voter's roll further complicate the issue. Instances where multiple entries exist for the same individual can lead to confusion and potential disenfranchisement. Sometimes voters find themselves unable to cast their ballots if their names are flagged as duplicates (Mbandlwa, 2023). The lack of transparency in the processes surrounding the compilation and maintenance of the voter's roll exacerbates these concerns. Opposition parties and civil society organizations have repeatedly called for independent audits and reforms to ensure the accuracy of the electoral register (Mbandlwa, 2023). However, the response from authorities has often been dismissive, further fueling suspicions of deliberate obfuscation aimed at preserving the ruling party's grip on power.

2.6 Measures to Help Zimbabwe Hold Credible Elections.

2.6.1 Independent Electoral Commission

`   Scholarly discourse consistently underscores the critical role of independent electoral commissions in safeguarding democratic integrity. ZESN (2023) asserts that establishing a genuinely autonomous Electoral Commission is essential for ensuring impartial oversight of electoral processes. Such a body can substantially bolster the credibility of elections by insulating them from partisan influence and political interference. Echoing this concern, the Carter Center (2024) observes that Zimbabwe's electoral environment has frequently been tainted by accusations of bias, procedural misconduct, and manipulation, factors that have eroded public trust in the system. The formation of a truly independent commission would not only restore confidence but also demonstrate the state's adherence to democratic norms and the rule of law. This body must operate autonomously, with the authority to manage all aspects of the electoral process, including voter registration, the management of polling stations, and the counting of votes (ZESN, 2023). To achieve this, it is essential that the composition of the commission reflects a diverse representation of society, including various political parties, civil

society organizations, and independent experts (ZESN, 2023). This has been a suggestion by experts and observers. The assumption is that this diversity will help ensure that decisions are made collectively and transparently, minimizing the risk of partisanship (Carter Center, 2024).

2.6.2 Media Freedom

For democratic environment conducive to credible elections, ensuring media freedom is essential. According to the Carter Center (2024), a dynamic and autonomous media sector is instrumental in enhancing public awareness, fostering inclusive dialogue, and ensuring governmental accountability. In the context of elections, Carter Center (2024) asserts that media outlets must operate freely, providing balanced and unbiased coverage of all political parties and candidates. Matsilele and Ruhanya (2024) highlights that this requires the abolition of restrictive laws and regulations that stifle journalistic independence and limit freedom of expression. Without a free press, the electorate is deprived of essential information, which is necessary for making informed choices. To achieve genuine media freedom, it has been recommended that the government should commit to protecting journalists and media organizations from harassment, intimidation and censorship (Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2024). This includes safeguarding the rights of journalists to report without fear of retribution, enabling them to investigate and cover electoral issues comprehensively (Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2024). Furthermore, it is vital to ensure that state-owned media outlets are reformed to provide equitable access to all political parties, allowing them to present their policies and viewpoints without bias (Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2024). Equal airtime and fair representation in media coverage can significantly enhance the democratic process, allowing voters to evaluate candidates on their merits rather than being swayed by partial narratives.

2.6.3 Improved Party Financing

Regulating political party financing is crucial to prevent undue influence by powerful actors in the election process. Makone (2025) asserts that campaign financing is often a significant determinant of electoral success, and without proper regulation, disparities in funding can skew the democratic process. By establishing clear and comprehensive rules governing campaign financing, the government can mitigate the risks associated with corruption and the undue influence of wealthy donors or special interest groups. Makone (2025) recommends that a robust legal framework should be implemented to govern how political parties raise and spend funds. Zamchiya (2024) asserts that this framework must include limits on contributions from individuals and organizations, ensuring that no single entity can exert disproportionate influence over a party or candidate. Moreover, ensuring transparency in campaign financing is imperative, with political parties obligated to routinely disclose both the origins of their financial support and detailed expenditure records (Zamchiya, 2024). Such openness is vital for cultivating public confidence in the integrity of electoral processes, as it allows voters to understand who is financially backing their candidates and how campaign resources are being utilized (Zamchiya, 2024). Additionally, public funding for political parties could be considered to promote equity in campaign financing (Zamchiya, 2024). By providing financial support to all registered parties, the government can help level the playing field, enabling smaller or emerging parties to compete effectively against established ones. This approach enhances competition and also encourages a more diverse political landscape, reflecting a broader range of viewpoints and interests.

2.6.4 Security Sector Reform

Security sector reform has also been suggested. According to Ndawana and Nganje (2024) implementing security sector reforms is essential to ensure that security forces,

including the police and military, remain neutral and do not interfere in the electoral process. Historically, the involvement of security agencies in elections has raised concerns about intimidation, violence, and the suppression of dissent, which undermines the democratic process (Ndawana & Nganje, 2024). To build public trust and ensure a fair electoral environment, these reforms must prioritize the independence and accountability of security forces. Mude (2024) asserts that it is crucial to establish clear legal frameworks that delineate the roles and responsibilities of security agencies during elections. These frameworks should explicitly prohibit the involvement of security forces in the electoral process, particularly in activities like voter intimidation or the unlawful policing of political gatherings (Mude, 2024). Training programs should be developed to educate security personnel about their obligations to uphold democratic principles and protect citizens' rights during elections (ZESN, 2023). Establishing independent bodies to investigate complaints and allegations of misconduct can help ensure accountability. These bodies should have the authority to act on reports of violence or intimidation and should be transparent in their findings to foster public confidence in the electoral process (ZESN, 2023). Another critical aspect is the need for community engagement. Security forces should work collaboratively with civil society organizations to promote peaceful elections and build trust within communities. This partnership can help demystify the role of security agencies, allowing citizens to feel more secure in exercising their democratic rights (Mude, 2024). Additionally, it is essential to promote the professionalization of security forces through training and education focused on human rights and democratic governance.

2.6.5 Transparent Voters' Roll

Establishing a transparent and inclusive voter registration framework is fundamental to democratic practice. Bandama (2024) contends that an efficiently administered registration system serves as the cornerstone of electoral legitimacy, guaranteeing that all eligible

individuals are afforded the opportunity to engage in the voting process. To enhance this system, the government must adopt measures that prioritize transparency, accessibility, and the use of technology to maintain accurate voter rolls (Bandama, 2024). The voter registration process should be streamlined to make it easier for citizens to register. This can include extending registration periods, offering multiple registration locations, and providing online registration options (Bandama, 2024). In addition, targeted outreach initiatives aimed at historically marginalized constituencies, including young people, women, and rural communities, are vital for promoting awareness of electoral rights and facilitating informed participation in the voter registration process. (Bandama, 2024). Mbandlwa (2023) asserts that transparency is vital in maintaining public confidence in the voter registration system. The government should regularly publish updated voter rolls, allowing citizens to verify their registration status and ensuring that any discrepancies can be addressed promptly (Mbandlwa, 2023). This transparency can help prevent issues like duplicate registrations or the inclusion of ineligible voters, reinforcing the integrity of the electoral process. Moreover, employing technology can significantly enhance the accuracy and security of voter rolls (Bandama, 2024).

2.7 Research Gap

Despite the extensive literature on electoral processes in Zimbabwe and the broader African context, several critical gaps remain that warrant further investigation. A systematic appraisal of historical electoral reform initiatives in Zimbabwe is urgently required to determine their effectiveness in enhancing electoral credibility. Scholarly inquiry should prioritize evaluating the tangible outcomes of these reforms, particularly their influence on institutional integrity and public confidence in the democratic process. Despite numerous reform efforts, there remains a notable gap in comprehensive assessments that critically examine their implementation and long-term impact. Research is needed to analyse the

effectiveness of these reforms in enhancing electoral integrity, determining which measures have been successful, and identifying those that require further adjustment.

2.8 Chapter Summary

In conclusion, the potential for holding credible elections in Zimbabwe hinges on addressing the multifaceted challenges that have historically undermined the electoral process. This includes establishing an independent Electoral Commission, ensuring media freedom, and implementing robust security sector reforms. Additionally, fostering civic education and actively engaging marginalized groups are vital for creating an inclusive political environment. By adopting these measures, Zimbabwe can enhance electoral integrity, rebuild public trust, and realize its democratic aspirations. Ultimately, a commitment to transparent and fair electoral practices will empower citizens and pave the way for a more stable and representative governance system, reflecting the true will of the people.

CHAPTER 3

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

` This chapter delineates the research design and methodological framework employed to investigate electoral experiences within the Zimbabwean context. It opens with an articulation of the constructivist paradigm underpinning the study, which foregrounds participants' interpretive agency in constructing meaning around electoral processes. A qualitative approach, anchored in a case study design, facilitates the collection of nuanced perspectives from stakeholders situated in selected constituencies. The chapter further elaborates on the target population, sampling strategies, and data collection instruments, alongside measures undertaken to ensure validity and reliability. Ethical protocols are also examined, affirming the study's compliance with established research standards and principles of responsible scholarship.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy provides the foundational lens through which data is gathered, interpreted, and understood. According to Kirongo and Odoyo (2020), it reflects the researcher's beliefs about appropriate methods for collecting, analyzing, and applying information related to a given phenomenon. Williamson (2021) further explains that research philosophy encompasses the core assumptions about reality and knowledge that shape the research approach. This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, which, as noted by Kirongo and Odoyo (2020), views learning as an active and generative process whereby individuals construct meaning through lived experiences. Given the study's focus on electoral experiences, this paradigm was deemed appropriate for capturing participants' subjective interpretations.

One of the key strengths of constructivism lies in its capacity to illuminate complex social realities by examining how individuals make sense of their environments (Kirongo & Odoyo, 2020). It also supports a comprehensive understanding of research participants by valuing diverse perspectives and experiential narratives, thereby enriching analytical depth (Williamson, 2021).

3.3 Research Methodology

Research methodology outlines the strategic approach used to conduct the study. Harrison, Reilly and Creswell (2020) define research methodology as the overall strategy that outlines the way in which research is to be conducted, encompassing the theoretical framework, data collection methods, and analysis techniques. Qualitative research methods were used in the study. Harrison, Reilly and Creswell (2020) states that qualitative research is primarily exploratory research that seeks to understand human behaviour from the informants' perspective. Hirose and Creswell (2023) describe qualitative research as a methodological approach aimed at comprehending intricate social dynamics by deeply examining personal experiences, belief systems, and contextual factors. In relation to the study, qualitative data was collected in order to find out participant opinions and experiences regarding elections in Zimbabwe. The advantage of using qualitative research methods is that they provide a deep insight into participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences, allowing researchers to explore complex social phenomena (Hirose & Creswell, 2023). These methods consider the context in which participants live, producing findings that are relevant and applicable to real-world situations (Hirose & Creswell, 2023). Qualitative inquiry yields in-depth and textured data through methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations, enabling a comprehensive and context-sensitive interpretation of the research topic.

3.4 Research Design

The research design serves as a systematic blueprint for executing the study. Schoch (2020) characterizes it as a comprehensive plan that encompasses participant selection, data collection strategies, and analytical procedures. Similarly, Kekeya (2021) views research design as the strategic configuration of conditions that facilitate data gathering and interpretation, aiming to balance methodological rigor with procedural efficiency. This study adopts a case study design, which, according to Kekeya (2021), entails an intensive exploration of a phenomenon within its natural setting, emphasizing participants' lived experiences and interpretive frameworks. Schoch (2020) further notes that such a qualitative approach enables the examination of specific instances, yielding a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of the subject under investigation. The case study in this research centred the stakeholders in the conduction of elections in Mazowe North and Guruve South. The aim is to investigate their experiences regarding the credibility of elections in Zimbabwe. The advantage of using case study research design is that case studies provide a deep understanding of complex issues by examining a phenomenon in detail, capturing the nuances that might be overlooked in broader studies (Schoch, 2020). They allow researchers to explore the context surrounding a case, helping to understand how different factors influence outcomes.

3.5 Population and Sample

3.5.1 Population

The study population includes all relevant stakeholders engaged in the research context. As noted by Stratton (2021), a population refers to the complete group of individuals or units possessing the attributes that align with the researcher's focus of inquiry. In the context of the study, the population comprised of stakeholders in the election process in Mazowe North and

Guruve South Constituencies. That included politicians, civil society representatives, voters and traditional leaders.

3.5.2 Sample

The sample comprises a purposive subset of individuals drawn from the broader study population. As Casteel and Bridier (2021) explain, a sample represents a segment of the population selected for empirical investigation, enabling researchers to infer broader conclusions. In this study, the sample included seven politicians, ten representatives from civil society organizations, ten registered voters, and three traditional leaders.

3.6 Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was used in the selection of respondents. Robinson (2024) describe it as a sampling technique where the researcher selects individuals who are believed to have knowledge or experience on the topic. This leads to richer and more informative data Purposive sampling offers the benefit of enabling researchers to intentionally choose individuals who possess particular expertise or lived experiences aligned with the focus of the study (Robinson, 2024). This method facilitates a deeper understanding of complex issues, as participants are chosen for their ability to provide detailed perspectives on the research topic (Robinson, 2024). Politicians were selected because of their first-hand experience in how elections are conducted in the area. Civil society representatives were be selected because of their knowledge regarding human rights concerns associated with elections in Zimbabwe. Voters were selected based on their experiences in the previous elections. Traditional leaders were selected because they are community leaders and they may have detailed insights about elections.

3.7 Data Collection Methods

3.7.1 In-depth Interviews

In this study, in-depth interviews served as the principal method of data collection. According to Rutledge and Hogg (2020), this qualitative approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of individuals' lived experiences through extended, conversational engagement. The interviews were instrumental in capturing participants' views and interpretations concerning electoral credibility. One key strength of this method is its capacity to elicit rich, detailed accounts of respondents' emotions, beliefs, and reflections, thereby deepening the researcher's understanding of the subject matter (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Additionally, in-depth interviews offer flexibility, allowing researchers to tailor questions and probe further based on participants' responses, which can reveal unforeseen themes or insights (Harrison, Reilly & Creswell, 2020). The individualized format also fosters a more relaxed setting, encouraging candid and authentic sharing of perspectives.

3.7.2 Semi-structured Questionnaire

Semi-structured questionnaires were employed as supplementary data collection instruments in the study. As noted by Aung et al. (2021), this method integrates both closed and open-ended items, offering a flexible framework that captures quantitative metrics alongside qualitative insights. This dual structure enables participants to articulate their perspectives in their own words while allowing for systematic comparison across responses. The approach enhances data richness by eliciting nuanced reflections that may be overlooked in rigidly structured formats. Its adaptability also permits researchers to explore emergent themes through follow-up questions, fostering deeper inquiry (Aung et al., 2021). Moreover, the conversational nature of semi-structured questionnaires encourages openness, helping

respondents feel more at ease when sharing their experiences, making them particularly suitable for this research context.

3.7.3 Secondary Data

Secondary data plays a vital role in research by offering access to information that has already been compiled and disseminated by other sources. As Pederson et al. (2020) explain, it encompasses data originally gathered by external parties, which researchers can repurpose to explore new questions or validate existing findings. This type of data allows for efficient analysis without the need for direct collection, making it a valuable asset in both exploratory and confirmatory research contexts. Documentary data was used as secondary data in the study. According to O'Connor (2020) documentary data includes written materials such as reports, articles, books, government publications, historical documents, and other forms of recorded information. Documentary data provides context and understanding of historical events, trends, and social changes over time, allowing researchers to analyse developments in depth (O'Connor, 2020). A variety of documents can present multiple viewpoints, enabling researchers to explore different interpretations and analyses of a subject.

3.8 Validity and Reliability

Validity is a foundational principle in research, reflecting the extent to which study findings accurately capture the phenomenon under investigation. As Rose and Johnson (2020) explain, it pertains to the precision of interpretations drawn from the data and the degree to which the research effectively measures its intended constructs. In this study, validity was reinforced through triangulation, an approach that involves integrating multiple data sources, methods, or perspectives to substantiate findings. This included the use of interviews and document analysis to construct a more holistic understanding of the subject matter. Reliability, as defined by Mosbah (2024), refers to the consistency and dependability of measurement

outcomes across time and varying conditions. It assesses whether a research tool or procedure yields stable results when applied repeatedly. To uphold reliability, a comprehensive research protocol was developed, detailing the procedures for data collection and analysis. This structured approach enhances replicability. Additionally, meticulous documentation of the research process was maintained to support transparency and consistency throughout the study.

3.9 Data Presentation and Analysis

The study employed qualitative data analysis to interpret and make sense of the collected information. As outlined by Reilly and Creswell (2020), this process begins with the collection of qualitative data through techniques such as interviews. Once gathered, the data undergoes preparation, which includes transcribing audio recordings, organizing field notes, and structuring the material for analysis. A critical phase in this process is coding, where researchers identify and assign labels to recurring themes, ideas, or patterns within the dataset (Li & Zhang, 2022). This step involves segmenting the data into manageable units, enabling a systematic and in-depth examination of its content. After coding, the development of themes takes place, wherein related codes are grouped into broader categories that capture the essence of the data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the overall narrative (Li &Zhang, 2022). Finally, interpretation involves analysing these themes in relation to the research questions and context, helping to make sense of the meanings and implications derived from the qualitative data (Li & Zhang, 2022).

3.10 Ethical Considerations

This research emphasized ethical considerations to protect the rights and welfare of participants. The researcher obtained a permission letter from the university prior to the study. Informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring they receive detailed information regarding the study. Participants were informed that their participation is voluntary.

Additionally, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity was a primary focus throughout the research process. All collected data was handled with strict confidentiality.

3.11 Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter has articulated the research design and methodological choices underpinning the study, guided by a constructivist paradigm that informs the exploration of electoral experiences in Zimbabwe. Through the use of qualitative methods and a case study framework, the research seeks to capture the nuanced perspectives of diverse stakeholders engaged in the electoral process. The targeted population and purposive sampling strategy ensured the inclusion of voices most relevant to the inquiry, while the selected data collection techniques generated rich and meaningful insights. Attention to validity, reliability, and ethical rigor further strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, which investigates the prospects for conducting credible elections in Zimbabwe. Drawing on qualitative interviews and thematic data analysis, the research captures the perceptions and lived experiences of a diverse range of stakeholders, including local residents, political actors, civil society representatives, and academic experts. The findings illuminate the key determinants of electoral credibility, alongside persistent challenges that undermine the integrity of the electoral process. By interrogating these dynamics, the chapter offers a nuanced understanding of Zimbabwe's contemporary electoral landscape and contributes to ongoing discourse on democratic reform and governance enhancement.

4.2 Respondent Information

4.2.1 Interview and Questionnaire Response Rate

Table 4.1: Interview and Questionnaire Response Rate

	Expected	Responded	Response Rate
Politicians	7	7	100%
NGO and Civil Society	10	10	100%
Voters	10	10	100%

Traditional Leaders	3	3	100%
Total	30	30	100%

4.2.2 Gender

Figure 4.1: Gender of Participants
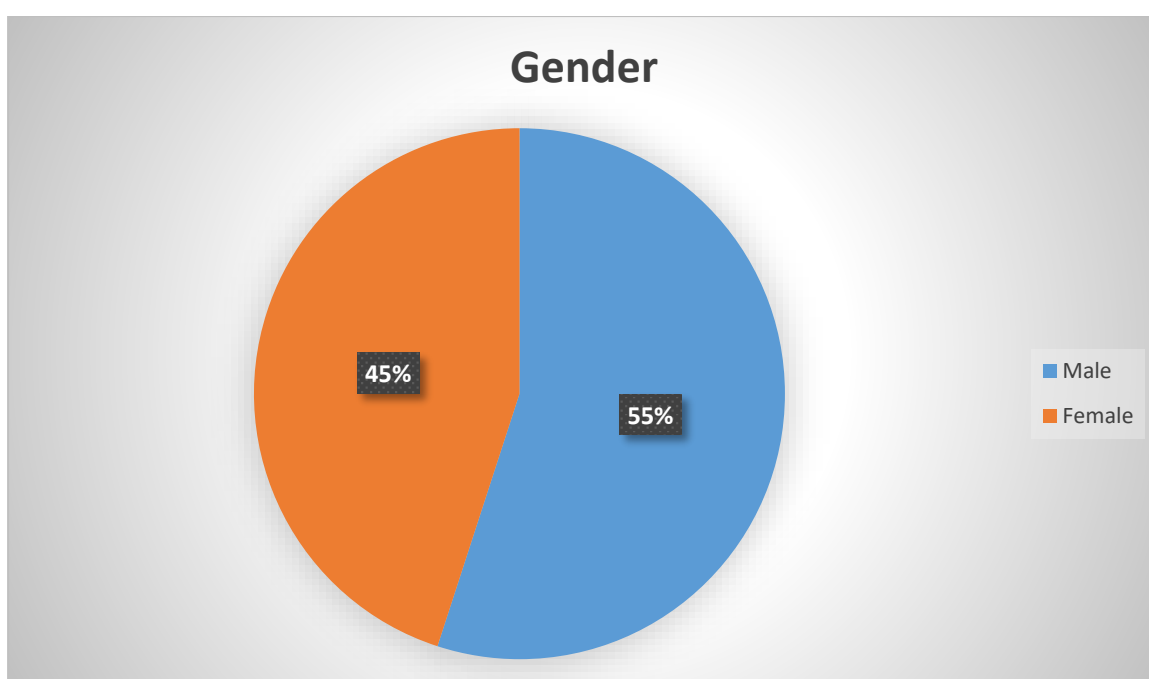
About 55% (16) of the respondents were male while another 45% (14) was female. This is because women may have fewer opportunities to engage in public discussions because men have historically dominated politics and public life in Zimbabwe. Also traditional gender roles may discourage women from participating in public discussions especially on topic like politics and elections.

4.2.3 Age Distribution

Figure 4.2: Age Rage of Participants
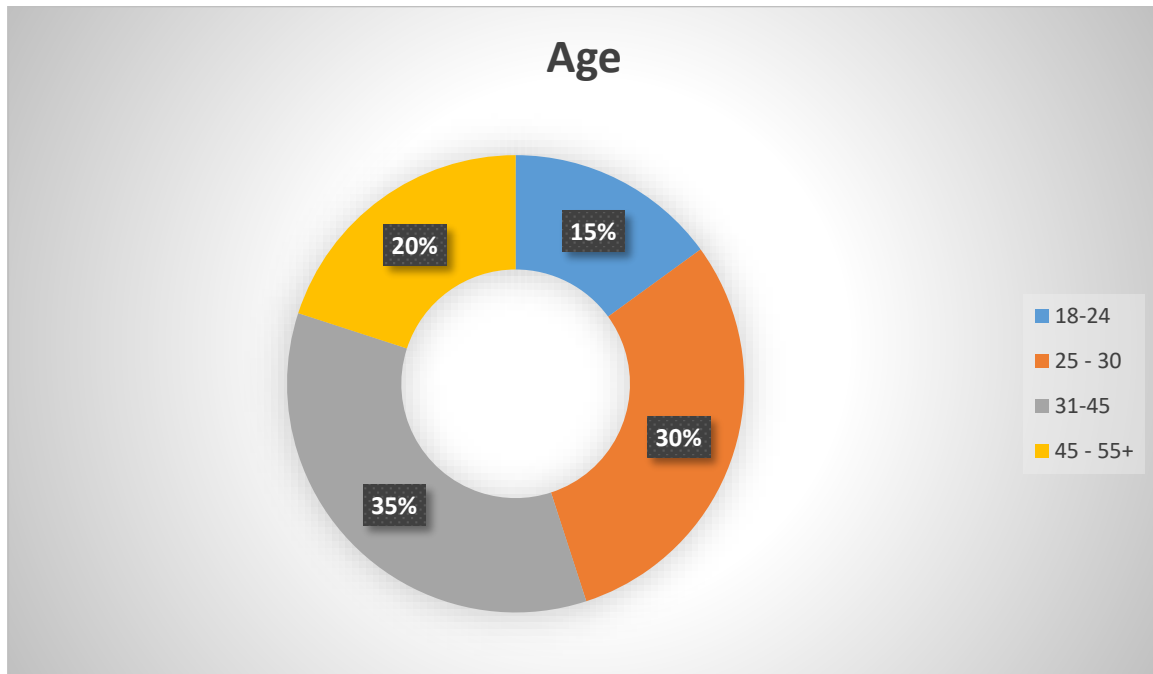
Approximately 15% (4) of participants were aged between 18 to 24 years of age. Additionally, an estimated 31% (8) of respondents were aged between 25 and 30 years of age. Another, 32% (12) of respondents were aged between 31 and 45 years of age. Lastly, 21% (6) of the respondents were aged between 45 years of age and above.

4.3 Factors that Can Enhance the Credibility of Elections

Respondents were asked about the factors that can enhance the credibility of elections in Zimbabwe. The initial assumption was that there were chances for credible elections in Zimbabwe, contingent upon the establishment of critical reforms. This assumption was confirmed, as respondents consistently emphasized the necessity of an independent electoral commission to foster electoral integrity. The following themes emerged from the findings.

4.3.1 Independent Electoral Commission

The findings underscore the critical role of an autonomous Electoral Commission in strengthening the credibility of elections in Zimbabwe. Participants consistently highlighted the need for transparency and procedural fairness as foundational elements of a trustworthy electoral process. One politician shared,

"An independent Electoral Commission is essential. It would ensure that electoral processes are free from political interference, allowing citizens to trust the outcomes."

An NGO worker noted,

"The current perception is that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) is biased. We need a commission that represents all voices, not just those in power."

A civil society activist stated,

"Without an independent body overseeing elections, the integrity of the electoral process will always be questioned. An impartial ZEC can help rebuild public confidence."

These findings reinforce the argument that establishing an independent electoral commission is essential for legitimizing electoral authority. Maphunye (2016) contends that, in line with social contract theory, a government's legitimacy hinges on its ability to reflect the will of the people through impartial institutions free from political interference. This theoretical lens, along with democratic theory discussed in Chapter 2, provides a critical framework for interpreting stakeholder concerns. As Dedi et al. (2023) explain, the social contract requires that governance structures be rooted in fairness and transparency—principles undermined when electoral bodies lack autonomy. The perceived partisanship of the Zimbabwe Electoral

Commission (ZEC) compromises its credibility and weakens its representative function. Likewise, democratic theory underscores the importance of institutional accountability and responsiveness, both of which are diminished when electoral commissions operate under political influence (Converse, 2018).

4.3.2 Effective Monitoring

The findings indicate that allowing international observers to effectively monitor the electoral process and granting them full access is vital for enhancing the credibility of elections in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders recognize the importance of external oversight in ensuring transparency. An opposition politician stated,

> *"International observers are critical. Their presence can deter malpractices and reassure voters that the election is being conducted fairly."*

A civil society representative emphasized,

> *"When international observers are allowed to monitor all aspects of the election, it creates a level of accountability that is often lacking in local oversight."*

One voter expressed,

> *"Knowing that international observers are watching gives us hope that our voices will be heard and that the election results will be respected."*

The findings further highlight the significance of independent electoral observation in safeguarding the integrity of Zimbabwe's electoral processes. As noted by ZESN (2023), the presence of impartial observers plays a pivotal role in verifying the fairness and transparency of elections, thereby reinforcing public trust. Participants emphasized that enabling international observers to conduct thorough and unobstructed monitoring is essential for

bolstering electoral credibility. This perspective aligns with democratic theory, which prioritizes accountability, openness, and institutional checks as core principles of legitimate governance. According to Converse (2018) effective monitoring by independent observers serves as a mechanism for accountability, ensuring that electoral processes are conducted fairly and that any irregularities are promptly reported and addressed. This shows that literature supports the notion that effective monitoring enhances electoral integrity. Studies indicate that countries with robust international monitoring mechanisms, such as those in Ghana tend to experience fewer allegations of fraud and violence during elections (Kumah-Abiwu & Darkwa, 2020).

4.3.3 Media Freedom

It was noted in the findings that ensuring media freedom and independence is essential for providing balanced coverage of elections in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders highlight the need for equitable access to media for all political parties, particularly opposition groups.

An activist asserted,

> *"A free press is fundamental to democracy. When media outlets operate independently, they can provide fair coverage of all parties, which is crucial for informed voter decisions. In previous elections ZANU PF has received wider coverage on state media."*

An opposition politician noted,

> *"Our access to media is often restricted. Without ample media coverage, our messages struggle to reach the electorate. This undermines our chances in the elections."*

A civil society representative stated,

"The current media landscape heavily favours the ruling party. We need reforms that ensure opposition parties receive equal airtime to present their platforms."

In support of this perspective Matsilele and Ruhanya (2024) emphasize that a robust media is critical for good governance, as it empowers citizens with the information needed to make informed choices during elections. These factors highlight the importance of media freedom during election periods. The findings highlight the critical importance of media freedom and independence in providing balanced coverage of elections in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders, including civil society representatives and opposition politicians, emphasized that equitable access to media for all political parties, especially opposition groups, is essential for fostering informed voter decisions. This finding aligns with democratic theory, which advocates for open and fair communication as a cornerstone of democracy. A free press is essential for ensuring that all voices are heard, allowing citizens to make informed choices at the ballot box (Gu, 2024). The lack of media freedom undermines this democratic principle, as it restricts access to diverse viewpoints and hinders public discourse.

4.3.4 Voter Education

The findings reveal that robust voter education is essential for equipping citizens with the knowledge required to navigate the electoral process, understand their rights, and engage meaningfully in democratic participation within Zimbabwe. Stakeholders emphasize the positive impact of informed voters on the integrity of the electoral process. A civil society activist remarked,

"Voter education is key to empowering citizens. When people understand their rights and the voting process, they are more malleable to take part and make informed choices."

An NGO worker shared,

> *"Many voters lack basic knowledge about how the implications of voting. Comprehensive education initiatives can bridge this gap and encourage higher turnout."*

One voter expressed,

> *"I attended a voter education workshop, and it opened my eyes. Understanding my rights made me feel more confident about my vote and the entire electoral process."*

The findings reveal that providing comprehensive voter education is crucial for empowering citizens to understand the electoral process. Stakeholders, including civil society activists and voters, emphasized the positive impact of informed voters on the integrity of the electoral process. Mhuru (2023) asserts that civic education plays a critical role in fostering informed participation, which is essential for the legitimacy of the electoral process. That is why it is deemed as an important part of the election process. This finding aligns with both social contract theory and democratic theory discussed in earlier. Social contract theory posits that citizen participation is essential for legitimizing political authority (Dedi et al., 2023). When citizens are well-informed about their rights and the electoral process, they can actively engage in governance and hold their leaders accountable. Democratic theory further emphasizes the necessity of informed participation, asserting that a well-educated electorate is vital for the health of a democracy (Gu, 2024). These factors could help improve how elections are held in Zimbabwe.

4.3.5 Leadership Commitment

The findings also emphasize that fostering electoral credibility in Zimbabwe requires a firm commitment from all political parties and their leaders to uphold democratic norms and

respect the outcomes of elections. Such adherence to democratic principles is essential for cultivating public trust and ensuring the legitimacy of the electoral process. Stakeholders highlight the need for genuine political will to foster a stable democratic environment. An opposition politician stated,

"For elections to be credible, we need all parties to commit to respecting the electoral process. Without this political will, we risk further instability and disillusionment among voters."

A political analyst noted,

"When leaders publicly endorse the importance of democracy and pledge to accept election results, it sets a positive example for their supporters and the nation."

One voter expressed,

"I've seen too many elections where results are disputed. If political leaders genuinely accepted the outcomes, it would encourage more people to participate in the electoral process."

The findings suggest that reinforcing electoral credibility in Zimbabwe requires unwavering commitment from all political parties and their leadership to uphold democratic values and respect electoral outcomes. Such adherence fosters institutional legitimacy and strengthens public confidence in the electoral process. Stakeholders, including opposition politicians and political analysts, emphasized that genuine political will is necessary to foster a stable democratic environment. Mhuru (2023) the acceptance of electoral outcomes by political leaders is fundamental for fostering trust in democracy and ensuring the stability of governance. In that regard, there is a need for transparency in elections so that all parties can verify the credibility of results. This finding aligns closely with democratic theory, which

emphasizes the need for accountability and responsiveness from political leaders. When leaders publicly commit to democratic processes and accept electoral outcomes, they set a positive example for their supporters and reinforce the legitimacy of the electoral system (Walters, 2022). This is also relevant to social contract theory, which asserts that the government must reflect the will of the people and act in their best interests to maintain legitimacy (Maphunye, 2016).

4.4 How the Political Landscape Influences Elections

The participants were asked about how the current political environment influences the credibility of elections. The main assumptions regarding the challenges to credible elections included the belief that the political landscape posed significant barriers. This assumption was confirmed as respondents articulated how weak legal structures and the influence of security forces hinder the electoral process, contributing to a climate of fear and distrust. Additionally, it was assumed that there were chances for credible elections if these challenges could be addressed. This assumption was both validated and nuanced by the findings, as stakeholders expressed a desire for reforms to combat political violence and enhance institutional independence. However, the persistent dominance of established parties created skepticism about the feasibility of achieving meaningful change. The following themes emerged in the responses.

4.4.1 Weak Legal and Institutional Frameworks

The findings indicate that the credibility of elections in Zimbabwe is undermined by a fragile legal and institutional framework. This significantly influences the integrity of elections in Zimbabwe, allowing abuses and irregularities to persist. The respondents highlighted the need for robust legal structures to ensure fair electoral processes. A legal expert remarked,

"The current legal framework is insufficient to protect electoral integrity. Without strong laws and institutions, there's little deterrent against electoral malpractices. There are inadequate legal protections for those that protest election results"

There were comments made regarding the violence that emerged when rioters tried to protest the 2018 election results. An opposition politician stated,

"Weak institutions make it easy for those in power to manipulate the electoral process. We need comprehensive reforms to build a more resilient framework that upholds democratic principles. The ruling party is known to weaponise its power when people express their dissatisfaction against it."

A civil society representative noted,

"Insufficient accountability within electoral institutions fosters conditions conducive to malpractice, thereby undermining public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process."

The findings indicate that a weak legal and institutional framework significantly influences the integrity of elections in Zimbabwe, allowing abuses and irregularities to persist. Respondents highlighted the need for robust legal structures to ensure fair electoral processes, pointing out that the current deficiencies undermine public trust. The findings reinforce the view that robust legal frameworks and institutional structures are fundamental to preserving electoral integrity and protecting citizens' rights during elections. As Sithole (2023) observes, the presence of effective institutions is critical for ensuring that civic freedoms are respected and upheld throughout the electoral process. This perspective aligns with democratic theory, which underscores the necessity of strong, accountable institutions in promoting transparency, safeguarding democratic norms, and fostering public trust in governance. According to Schultz

(2022) a well-defined legal framework is essential for protecting citizens' rights and facilitating transparent governance. Additionally, this resonates with social contract theory, which posits that the legitimacy of a government is contingent upon its ability to uphold the rule of law and safeguard the rights of its citizens (Dedi et al., 2023).

4.4.2 Interference by Security Sector

It was also stated that the involvement of security forces in politics, often perceived as favouring the ruling party, has created an intimidating environment for opposition candidates and voters in Zimbabwe. Respondents expressed concern over the impact of this dynamic on electoral integrity. An opposition politician stated,

"The participation of security forces in the political arena feels like a threat. It discourages open dialogue and makes voters hesitant to support opposition candidates."

A civil society activist noted,

"When security forces are seen as part of the ruling party's machinery, it undermines public confidence in the electoral process. Voters must feel safe to express their choices freely."

A voter expressed,

"I often worry about speaking out or attending opposition events because of the potential backlash from security personnel. This fear can silence many voices during elections."

The findings reveal that interference by the security sector significantly impacts the electoral process in Zimbabwe, creating an environment of intimidation and fear among voters and

electoral officials. Supporting this perspective, Mautsi et al. (2024) highlights that the politicization of security forces often leads to significant electoral bias and intimidation. This undermines the democratic processes. However, the realism theory argues that the involvement of the security sector can serve a stabilizing function in societies, where the risk of violence and unrest is high (Harris, 2019). They suggest that a strong security presence may deter potential electoral violence and maintain order (Harris, 2019). Some leaders in Zimbabwe operate with the belief that opposition parties are foreign funded and they have a regime change agenda (Mautsi et al., 2024).

4.4.3 Dominance of Established Parties

The findings indicate that the long-standing dominance of the ZANU-PF has significantly limited the space for opposition parties, thereby impacting the competitiveness of elections in Zimbabwe. Participants expressed concerns over the implications of this dominance for democratic governance. An opposition leader stated,

"ZANU-PF's entrenched position in politics stifles competition. Many voters feel that their choices are limited, which discourages active participation in elections."

A political analyst noted,

"When one party has been in power for so long, it creates a perception of inevitability regarding electoral outcomes, which can demoralize both voters and opposition candidates."

A civil society representative remarked,

"The lack of a level playing field hinders the development of a vibrant multiparty system which is essential for a healthy democracy."

Mhuru (2023) concurs that the dominance of established parties can lead to electoral apathy among the electorate. This diminishes the overall quality of democratic participation. This finding aligns with pluralism theory, which posits that a healthy democracy should allow for multiple voices and parties to participate in the political process. When established parties monopolize power, they undermine the pluralistic nature of democracy, leading to the marginalization of alternative political viewpoints (Saggar, 2024). Existing literature supports the assertion that the dominance of established parties can hinder democratic development. Studies indicate that in contexts where one party holds significant power, such as Zimbabwe, electoral outcomes are often predetermined, resulting in reduced political competition and voter engagement (ZESN, 2023).

4.5 Challenges Hindering the Holding of Credible Elections

Respondents were asked about the challenges currently being faced with regards to how elections are conducted in Zimbabwe. The findings indicated several significant challenges that hinder the holding of credible elections in Zimbabwe. The assumption was that these challenges would be perceived as substantial barriers to credible elections. This assumption was confirmed, as participants repeatedly emphasized their experiences with political violence and intimidation, illustrating the pervasive impact of these issues on voter participation. The following responses were shared in light of the matter.

4.5.1 Allegations of Electoral Fraud

The findings indicate that allegations of electoral fraud, including vote rigging, tampering with voter rolls, and manipulation of results, significantly contribute to distrust in the electoral system in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders emphasize the urgent need to address these challenges to restore public confidence. An opposition candidate stated,

"Every election cycle, we hear stories of rigging and manipulation. These allegations create a toxic environment where voters feel their choices don't matter."

A civil society activist noted,

"When voters see irregularities, it breeds skepticism about the entire electoral process. Transparency is crucial to rebuild trust."

A voter expressed,

"I've lost faith in the system. If we can't trust that our votes are counted fairly, why should we even participate?"

Respondents reported numerous instances where irregularities, such as ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and manipulation of results, were perceived to have occurred during elections. Supporting this view, Zamchiya (2024) concurs that allegations of fraud have been prevalent in Zimbabwe's electoral landscape. Electoral fraud undermines the legitimacy of elections and poses a serious threat to democratic governance and public trust in institutions (Zamchiya, 2024. This relates to social trust theor**y**, which posits that trust in institutions is essential for fostering civic engagement and ensuring stable governance. When voters believe that elections are fraudulent, their trust in the political system diminishes (Schultz, 2022). This is the confidence that needs to be restored in Zimbabwe's political system.

4.5.2 Political Violence

The findings also show that incidents of violence and intimidation against opposition parties and their supporters severely undermine the safety and security of the electoral process in Zimbabwe. It has been noted how such violence affects voter participation and the overall integrity of elections. An opposition leader stated,

"Political violence creates an atmosphere of fear that stifles dissent and discourages supporters from openly backing their candidates."

A civil society representative noted,

"Fear causes people to hesitate to participate in electoral processes. We have seen opposition leaders being victimized because of their stance in political matters. "

A voter expressed,

"I've seen people in the community getting attacked for supporting opposition parties. This violence makes it hard to feel safe expressing my political views or voting."

Political violence harms individuals and also erodes the foundation of democratic participation, making it essential to address these issues for credible elections (Zamchiya, 2024). There have been several incidents of violence during elections. Examples include the 2018 election violence and the 2008 election violence (Zamchiya, 2024). This finding aligns with conflict theory, which examines how power disparities lead to social tensions and violence. Political violence often arises as a means of maintaining control and suppressing dissent within a context where power is heavily concentrated (Polacko, 2022). Existing literature supports the assertion that political violence severely undermines electoral integrity. Studies show that countries experiencing high levels of political violence, such as Zimbabwe, often see diminished voter turnout and increased public disillusionment with the political processes (Carter Center, 2024).

4.5.3 Voter Intimidation

The findings reveal that intimidation and harassment significantly discourage voters from participating in elections, particularly influencing them against supporting opposition

candidates, especially in rural areas of Zimbabwe. The respondents noted the pervasive impact of fear on electoral engagement. A rural opposition candidate stated,

> *"In our communities, people are often scared to express their political preferences. The fear of repercussions silences many potential voters."*

A civil society advocate noted,

> *"Intimidation tactics create a hostile environment that undermines the democratic process. Voters should feel free to support the candidates of their choice without fear of retribution."*

A voter in a rural area expressed,

> *"I want to support the opposition, but I worry about what might happen to me or my family if I do. This fear keeps many people quiet."*

Respondents reported various forms of intimidation, including threats from political party supporters, harassment at polling stations, and coercion to vote for specific candidates. The climate of intimidation suppresses voter turnout and also distorts the democratic process (Makone, 2024). Political tolerance is low and citizens live in constant fear of political repercussions especially in rural areas. This finding resonates with democratic theory, which underscores the centrality of free and fair elections in enabling citizens to exercise their voting rights without intimidation or coercion. Voter intimidation undermines the core democratic principle of voluntary participation in the electoral process (Walters, 2022). Existing literature supports the assertion that voter intimidation can severely hinder electoral integrity. Empirical evidence suggests that environments marked by electoral intimidation tend to experience reduced voter turnout and a corresponding erosion of public trust in the electoral process

(ZESN, 2023). Such conditions undermine democratic participation and weaken the legitimacy of electoral outcomes.

4.5.4 Restrictions on Freedom of Speech

It was also stated that severe restrictions on freedom of speech, particularly through laws like the Media and Access to Information Act (MOPA) and the authoritarian practices of ZANU-PF, have created a stifling environment for dissent in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders highlight the impact of these restrictions on democratic discourse and civic engagement. A journalist stated,

"The MOPA Act limits our ability to report freely. Journalists face intimidation and harassment when covering opposition activities or criticizing the government."

A civil society activist noted,

"When people cannot express their opinions without fear of repercussions, it hampers public debate and the ability to hold the government accountable."

A voter expressed,

"I often hesitate to voice my concerns about the government. The fear of being targeted for speaking out makes many of us silent."

Respondents reported instances of censorship, harassment of dissenting voices, and the suppression of media critical of the ruling party. Supporting this perspective, ZESN (2023) highlights that, authoritarian rule and restrictions on free speech undermine free political engagement in Zimbabwe. This creates a scenario where citizens feel unable to participate fully in the political process. According to Habermas (2021) the public sphere theory emphasizes the necessity of a space where citizens can freely discuss and debate political issues; without

this, democratic deliberation is severely compromised. Participants expressed that the fear of reprisal for expressing dissenting views discourages open political discourse and engagement. This environment stifles critical conversations about governance and electoral issues, leading to voter apathy and mistrust in the political system. The findings suggest that fostering an environment that encourages free expression is essential for a healthy democracy.

4.5.5 Disenfranchisement

As a result of the constant challenges, it was stated that majority of people are now suffering from disillusionment because of the current crisis. The findings indicate that persistent fraud and malpractices have led to the disenfranchisement of certain groups of eligible voters in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders emphasize the detrimental effects of these issues on electoral participation and democratic legitimacy. An opposition leader stated,

"Fraudulent practices disproportionately affect marginalized communities, effectively silencing their voices in the electoral process."

A civil society representative noted,

"When eligible voters are systematically disenfranchised, the foundational principles of democracy are compromised, and public confidence in the electoral system is significantly diminished."

A voter expressed,

"I feel that the situation in our politics is not fair. I was hoping the ballot paper could be used to solve our socioeconomic challenges. In my perspective, Zimbabwe is embroiled in a never ending cycle of poverty and distress."

Respondents reported issues such as restrictive voter registration processes, the manipulation of voter rolls, and deliberate efforts to exclude specific groups from participating in elections. Rwodzi (2024) concurs that people in Zimbabwe are living in an undesirable political situation. The ruling party has lost significant support yet it remains in power. This has led to the marginalization and perpetual suffering for the populace (Rwodzi, 2024). Existing literature supports the assertion that disenfranchisement significantly impacts electoral integrity and citizen engagement. Studies have shown that in contexts where disenfranchisement is prevalent, such as Zimbabwe, there is often a corresponding decline in voter turnout and political apathy (Kumah-Abiwu & Darkwa, 2020). Conversely, countries that implement inclusive voter registration processes tend to see higher levels of participation and greater public trust in elections (Kumah-Abiwu & Darkwa, 2020).

4.5.6 Patronage Politics

As indicated by the respondents, the economic instability in Zimbabwe has fostered a system of patronage politics. This is where the ruling elite manipulate resources and assistance based on political affiliation. Stakeholders express concern over how these dynamics affect governance and citizen welfare. An opposition leader stated,

"Economic hardship makes people vulnerable. The ruling party exploits this by offering aid selectively, ensuring loyalty through dependency."

A civil society representative noted,

"When government assistance is tied to political allegiance, it undermines the principle of equal access and exacerbates divisions within communities."

A voter shared,

"I know people who receive aid only because they support the ruling party. This creates resentment and deepens the inequalities in our society."

Respondents reported instances where political parties, particularly the ruling party, use state resources and personal favours to secure support from constituents, creating a cycle of dependency and complicity. Economic constraints can lead to a cycle of patronage that erodes democratic values and perpetuates inequality (Mazibuko & Thebe, 2024). The local people know that it can be tough to access government resources when one supports an opposition party. Existing literature supports the assertion that patronage politics can undermine democratic processes by skewing electoral competition. Studies have shown that in environments where patronage is prevalent, such as Zimbabwe, political loyalty is often bought rather than earned through legitimate political discourse (Chilunjika et al., 2022). Participants expressed concern that patronage politics creates an uneven playing field, where those without access to state resources feel disenfranchised. This dynamic can lead to a cycle of apathy and disengagement among voters who believe their needs will only be addressed through political loyalty rather than democratic participation (Chilunjika et al., 2022).

4.6 Reforms

In light of the prevalent challenges, the respondents were asked about the reforms that can be implemented to enhance how elections are held. The assumptions were that reforms could significantly improve the electoral process and that stakeholders would recognize the importance of these changes. Both assumptions were confirmed, as participants expressed strong support for measures aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability. The consensus among respondents indicated that without substantial reforms, the likelihood of achieving credible elections remains low. The findings underscored the necessity of

implementing comprehensive reforms to enhance the reliability of elections in Zimbabwe. The following responses were cited in relation to the matter.

4.6.1 Enhanced Transparency

The findings underscore the imperative of transparency throughout all phases of the electoral process as a cornerstone for rebuilding public trust and reinforcing the integrity of elections in Zimbabwe. It was stated that openness and accountability is important in the electoral process. An advocate stated,

"Transparency in voter registration and vote counting is essential. When people can see the process, it builds confidence in the system."

A civil society representative noted,

"Open scrutiny of the electoral process allows for independent verification, which is vital for ensuring that elections reflect the will of the people."

A voter expressed,

"I want to know that my vote counts and that the process is fair. Transparency would help us feel secure in participating."

Respondents highlighted that greater openness regarding electoral procedures, funding, and decision-making could significantly improve perceptions of fairness and accountability. Supporting this perspective, ZESN (2023) contends that implementing measures for enhanced transparency strengthens democracy and empowers citizens to hold their leaders accountable. Respondents expressed their desire for accountability and transparency during elections. Studies have shown that countries with transparent electoral processes tend to experience higher levels of public trust and participation (ZESN, 2023). Democracy theory emphasizes

the importance of informed citizen participation, suggesting that transparency fosters meaningful dialogue and enhances the quality of democratic engagement (Chilinjuka et al., 2022).

4.6.2 Secure Voting Technology

There are some respondents who indicated that utilizing secure and reliable voting technology is essential for minimizing the risk of fraud and ensuring accurate vote counting in Zimbabwe. These respondents recognize the transformative potential of technology in the electoral process. One NGO employee stated,

"Adopting secure voting technology can significantly reduce opportunities for fraud, making the electoral process more trustworthy."

A civil society advocate noted,

"When technology is implemented correctly, it enhances the integrity of elections and provides a clear, verifiable trail that can be audited."

A voter expressed,

"I believe that using technology for voting would make the process faster and more secure. It's important for us to feel that our votes are counted accurately."

Respondents expressed that modernizing voting systems through technology could help mitigate issues such as fraud, voter intimidation, and administrative errors. Carter Center (2024) notes that voting technologies are used extensively in developed countries such as the US. This has helped reduce instances of fraud because a significant portion of the information is handled digitally. In that regard, it was recommended that similar measures should be implemented in Zimbabwe. Existing literature supports the assertion that secure voting

technology can enhance electoral integrity. Studies indicate that countries implementing electronic voting systems and secure verification processes often report increased voter confidence and reduced allegations of fraud (Carter Center, 2024). Some scholars argue that while technology can improve electoral processes, it also introduces new risks, such as cyber security threats and technical malfunctions (Harris, 2019). Their main argument is that electoral fraud can still occur even when there are robust technologies available.

4.6.3 Legal Reforms

The findings indicate that revising electoral laws is essential for addressing ambiguities, strengthening campaign financing regulations, and ensuring fair dispute resolution mechanisms in Zimbabwe. Some respondents stress the need for comprehensive legal frameworks to enhance electoral integrity. A legal expert stated,

> *"Ambiguities in electoral laws create loopholes that can be exploited. Clear and precise regulations are necessary for a fair electoral process. There are some restrictive laws such as the MOPA Act that need to be removed"*

A civil society representative noted,

> *"Strengthening regulations on campaign financing is crucial to prevent corruption and ensure that all candidates have a fair chance to compete."*

A voter expressed,

> *"When disputes arise, there should be clear mechanisms for resolution. It's vital that we trust the system to handle conflicts fairly and transparently. Currently, the courts seem to be in favour of the ruling party"*

Respondents emphasized the need for updated electoral laws that promote fairness, protect voter rights, and ensure accountability of political actors. The Carter Center (2024) reports that Zimbabwe needs significant legal reforms that will help make elections more free and fair. In particular, Carter Center (2024) emphasizes that citizens need to exercise their freedom to participate in civic actions such as protesting. Existing literature supports the assertion that legal reforms are crucial for enhancing electoral integrity. Studies indicate that countries that undertake significant electoral reforms, such as updating voting laws, establishing independent electoral commissions, and reinforcing voter protections, tend to experience greater public confidence and higher levels of participation (ZESN, 2023).

4.6.4 Encouraging Genuine Political Pluralism

The findings underscore the importance of fostering an environment that supports free formation and operation of opposition parties, essential for a competitive political landscape in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders highlight the need for inclusive political practices. An opposition leader stated,

"Political pluralism is vital for democracy. When all parties can operate freely, it encourages healthy debate and accountability."

A civil society advocate noted,

"Creating space for diverse political voices ensures that citizens have real choices at the ballot box, which is fundamental for genuine representation."

A voter expressed,

"I want to see a variety of parties competing for my vote. A competitive landscape makes our leaders more accountable to the people."

Supporting this perspective, ZESN (2023) asserts that encouraging political pluralism is crucial for democratic resilience, as it allows for a more vibrant political discourse and empowers citizens. This is a critical issue that has been cited by respondents. Political pluralism fosters a more vibrant political discourse by allowing a range of perspectives to be expressed. When multiple parties and ideologies are represented, citizens are exposed to different viewpoints, which can lead to more informed decision-making (Maphunye, 2016). This dynamic encourages public debate that is essential for a healthy democracy (Maphunye, 2016). The contestation of ideas can stimulate critical thinking and engagement among the electorate, enabling citizens to better understand issues and the implications of various policies.

4.6.5 Promoting Media Freedom

The findings highlight the critical role of a free and independent media landscape in ensuring equitable and impartial coverage of all political parties and candidates. This is essential for fair campaigning in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders emphasize the need for media freedom as a cornerstone of democracy. An NGO worker stated,

> *"An independent media is fundamental for democracy. It holds those in power accountable and ensures that all voices are heard during elections."*

A civil society representative noted,

> *"Balanced media coverage allows voters to make informed decisions. When the media is free, it fosters a competitive environment for all parties."*

A voter expressed,

> *"I rely on the media to learn about different candidates and their platforms. Fair coverage is essential for us to engage meaningfully in the electoral process."*

Respondents emphasized that a free and independent media landscape is vital for disseminating accurate information, fostering informed public discourse, and ensuring political actors are held accountable. Matsilele and Ruhanya (2024) concur that promoting media freedom is crucial for a healthy democracy, as it empowers citizens through information and enhances the quality of public discourse. A free media serves as a vital source of accurate information, enabling citizens to make informed decisions. In an era increasingly defined by misinformation and disinformation, independent journalism serves a pivotal function in fact-checking and verifying public claims made by political actors (Rwodzi, 2024). This reliability fosters public trust and enables citizens to engage meaningfully with political issues, policies, and candidates (Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2024). Without accurate information, the electorate risks making decisions based on false narratives, undermining the democratic process.

4.6.6 Strengthening Electoral Institutions

The findings stress the necessity of establishing an independent and empowered electoral commission that operates free from political interference to ensure fair oversight of the electoral process in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders highlight the importance of robust electoral institutions for democratic integrity. A governance expert stated,

"An independent electoral commission is essential for maintaining the integrity of elections. ZEC should have the authority and resources to perform its duties without external pressures."

A civil society advocate noted,

"Empowering the electoral commission to oversee all aspects of the electoral process can enhance public confidence and accountability."

A voter expressed,

"I want to trust that the electoral process is fair. An independent commission can help ensure that every vote counts and that the rules are followed."

Respondents emphasized that a free and independent media landscape is essential for disseminating accurate information, fostering informed public discourse, and ensuring accountability among political actors. This view is reinforced by the Carter Center (2024), which affirms that strengthening electoral institutions is fundamental to democratic consolidation, as it provides the structural foundation for fair and transparent elections—an indispensable pillar of public trust. There have been concern about how ZEC is biased in favour of the ruling party (Rwodzi, 2024). Existing literature supports the assertion that media freedom is vital for electoral integrity. Studies show that countries with a robust, independent media environment tend to experience higher levels of voter engagement and trust in electoral processes.

4.7 Summary

In summary, this chapter illuminates the multifaceted challenges surrounding electoral credibility in Zimbabwe. The analysis reveals that several foundational elements are essential for enhancing the integrity of elections. Chief among these is the establishment of an independent electoral commission, complemented by rigorous monitoring from international observers. Media freedom and comprehensive voter education are equally critical, ensuring inclusive participation and enabling citizens to make informed choices. Nonetheless, persistent issues, such as political violence, allegations of electoral fraud, and voter intimidation, continue to erode public trust and compromise democratic legitimacy. The path forward requires the implementation of substantive reforms that foster transparency, deploy secure voting technologies, and cultivate genuine political pluralism. Addressing these systemic barriers is

imperative for advancing elections that authentically reflect the will of the electorate and contribute to a more democratic and stable society.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

5.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a conclusion to the study on the feasibility of holding credible elections in Zimbabwe. It summarizes key findings, presents actionable recommendations, and identifies areas for further research.

5.2 Summary

Chapter One introduced the study on the feasibility of conducting credible elections in African contexts, with a particular emphasis on Zimbabwe. It began by underscoring the central role of elections in democratic governance, highlighting their function in enabling citizens to choose their leaders and influence public policy. The chapter drew attention to the growing trend of autocratization across various regions, including Africa, where democratic norms are increasingly undermined, resulting in elections that are less free and fair. It identified persistent challenges confronting African nations—such as political instability, weak institutional frameworks, and governance deficits—that compromise the credibility of electoral processes. In the case of Zimbabwe, the historical trajectory since independence in 1980 reveals a pattern of contested elections, marked by allegations of vote rigging and systemic flaws that erode electoral integrity. The chapter articulated the research problem, detailing how electoral violence, media bias, and voter intimidation continue to obstruct the realization of credible elections. It also outlined the purpose of the study, presenting clearly defined objectives and research questions aimed at interrogating the barriers to electoral credibility and exploring potential pathways for reform.

Chapter Two provide a literature review and theoretical framework related to the study. It began by examining critical factors influencing electoral integrity, highlighting the complex political landscape and historical challenges faced by the country. The chapter discussed key concepts, including social contract theory and democratic theory, which emphasized citizen participation and government accountability as essential for legitimizing political authority. The literature indicated that many African nations struggled with electoral processes due to political instability, lack of institutional independence, and widespread corruption, which undermined democratic practices. Moreover, the chapter highlighted successful examples from other countries, such as Ghana and Tunisia, where political stability and institutional integrity led to credible elections. It also addressed the Southern African Development Community (SADC) context, emphasizing the challenges posed by weak electoral institutions and political tensions. The chapter underscored the importance of civil society, civic education, and youth engagement in fostering credible elections.

Chapter Three presented the methodological framework underpinning the study. It commenced with a discussion of the research philosophy, adopting a constructivist paradigm that foregrounds the active role of participants in shaping their interpretations of electoral experiences. The study employed a qualitative approach to elicit nuanced insights from diverse stakeholders engaged in the electoral process. A case study design was selected to examine specific constituencies, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the complexities surrounding electoral credibility. The target population included politicians, civil society actors, voters, and traditional leaders, individuals with direct experience and contextual knowledge. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants capable of providing rich, relevant data. Data collection methods comprised in-depth interviews and semi-structured questionnaires, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions and lived experiences.

The chapter also addressed key ethical considerations, including the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy.

Chapter Four presented the findings of the study. The chapter identified key themes that emerged from the data regarding factors that could enhance electoral credibility and the challenges hindering the process. Respondents emphasized the importance of establishing an independent electoral commission to ensure transparency and fairness in elections. Effective monitoring by international observers was highlighted as crucial for maintaining integrity and accountability. The need for media freedom and comprehensive voter education also emerged as significant factors in fostering informed participation. Conversely, the findings revealed persistent challenges, including allegations of electoral fraud, political violence, voter intimidation, and restrictions on freedom of speech. Participants expressed concerns about the dominance of established parties, which stifled competition and discouraged voter engagement. The chapter concluded by outlining potential reforms to enhance electoral credibility, emphasizing the need for transparency, secure voting technology, and a commitment to political pluralism

Chapter Five provided concluding remarks on the study concerning the feasibility of holding credible elections in Zimbabwe. It highlighted the critical findings regarding the establishment of an independent electoral commission as essential for ensuring transparency and fairness. The chapter underscored the pressing challenges, including political violence and media bias, which undermine electoral integrity. It also emphasized the importance of comprehensive reforms, such as enhancing voter education and ensuring media freedom, as vital steps toward fostering a democratic environment. Additionally, the chapter outlined actionable recommendations for stakeholders to improve the electoral process, reinforcing the need for a commitment to democratic principles. Ultimately, the findings advocate for a

collaborative effort among government, civil society, and citizens to realize the potential for credible elections in Zimbabwe.

5.3 Conclusions

To examine the possibilities of holding credible elections in Zimbabwe

The research identified several key factors that could enhance electoral integrity in Zimbabwe, notably the establishment of an independent electoral commission, which is essential for ensuring transparency and fairness. This aligns with social contract theory, which emphasizes that legitimate governance derives from the consent of the governed. A robust electoral body can effectively manage the electoral process, reduce allegations of fraud, and foster public trust. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of media freedom and comprehensive voter education as vital for informed participation. According to democratic theory, a free press facilitates transparent reporting, enabling citizens to counter misinformation. Voter education initiatives empower citizens to engage meaningfully in the electoral process. However, significant challenges persist, including political violence, voter intimidation, and systemic issues within established parties that stifle competition. These obstacles reflect the tensions described in democratic theory, where unequal power dynamics undermine electoral integrity. Addressing these issues through structural reforms is crucial for achieving credible elections and reinforcing democratic principles in Zimbabwe.

To assess the challenges that hinder the conduct of credible elections in Zimbabwe

The research concluded that there are critical obstacles to credible elections in Zimbabwe. These include political violence and voter intimidation, which created a climate of fear that discouraged citizen participation. Many respondents recounted experiences of harassment during elections, illustrating how these tactics undermine the integrity of the

electoral process. This finding aligns with democratic theory, which emphasizes that a safe environment is essential for free electoral engagement. The study also revealed concerns regarding the lack of an independent electoral commission. Participants perceived the commission as biased, failing to ensure fair practices and transparency, which eroded public confidence in the electoral system. This perception complicates the quest for legitimacy, reflecting the principles of social contract theory, where government authority must reflect the will of the people. Moreover, media bias was highlighted, with state-controlled media often disseminating propaganda favouring certain parties while marginalizing opposition voices. This imbalance restricted informed voter choice, contributing to an uneven playing field. Lastly, systemic issues, including the dominance of established parties, stifled competition and further hindered democratic participation.

To establish possible measures to hold credible elections in Zimbabwe

The research concluded that that establishing an independent electoral commission is fundamental for enhancing electoral integrity. An impartial body would effectively oversee the electoral process, ensuring transparency and minimizing allegations of fraud, thereby fostering public trust. This aligns with social contract theory, which asserts that legitimate governance must reflect the will of the people. The study also highlighted the need for comprehensive electoral reforms, including secure voting technologies to prevent tampering and enhance the voting experience. Participants suggested adopting biometric voter registration to create a more accurate voter roll, reducing manipulation risks. Civil society engagement emerged as a critical measure, with participants stressing the importance of involving organizations in monitoring elections and conducting voter education campaigns. These efforts could empower citizens, increase voter turnout, and promote informed decision-making, in line with democratic theory, which underscores the necessity of an informed electorate for a healthy democracy. Ensuring

media freedom was deemed vital for credible elections, as an independent press would provide balanced coverage, enabling informed voter choices. Lastly, fostering a political culture that encourages competition and pluralism is essential.

5.4 Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made in light of the study;

- ❖ The government should create a fully independent electoral commission to oversee the electoral process, ensuring transparency and accountability. This aligns with social contract theory, which emphasizes the need for legitimacy derived from the will of the people through fair electoral practices.

- ❖ The government must implement and enforce comprehensive laws that protect citizens from political violence and voter intimidation. Such measures are essential for fostering a safe environment for democratic participation, as highlighted in democratic theory, which underscores the importance of security for electoral integrity.

- ❖ Civil society organizations should intensify efforts in voter education campaigns to empower citizens with knowledge about their rights and the electoral process. This approach reflects the democratic theory's emphasis on informed participation, which is crucial for enhancing electoral legitimacy and public engagement.

- ❖ Media outlets should ensure fair and balanced coverage of all political parties to facilitate informed voter choices. This recommendation is rooted in democratic theory, which advocates for a free press as a cornerstone of democracy, enabling citizens to engage with diverse political viewpoints.

5.5 Areas for Further Study

To investigate how the implementation of secure voting technologies and biometric registration affects voter participation and election integrity in Zimbabwe.

To analyse the relationship between media coverage and voter behaviour, focusing on how different types of media narratives impact public perception of political parties and candidates.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Permission Letter

BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION

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DEPARTMENT OF PEACE AND GOVERNANCE

17 January 2025

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RE: REQUEST TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH IN YOUR ORGANISATION

This serves to introduce the bearer, **Sharon Nyamadzawo** Student Registration Number **B210061B**, who is a **HBSC PEACE AND GOVERNANCE** student at Bindura University of Science Education and is carrying out a research project in your area/institution.

May you please assist the student to access data relevant to the study, and where possible, conduct interviews as part of a data collection process.

Yours respectfully

J.KUREBWA (DR)
Acting Chairperson

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Appendix B: Interview Guide for Government Officials and Politicians

Preamble

My name is Sharon Nyamadzawo, I am a student of Peace and Governance Studies at Bindura University of Education (BUSE). I am studying for a bachelor's degree program in the field. To fulfil my studies, I'm writing a research paper on the credibility of elections. The tittle of my paper is Possibility of Holding Credible Elections in African Countries: A Case Study of Zimbabwe.

The information obtained during this interview will be used only for academic purposes. Anonymity will also be ensured.

Interview questions

1. What do you believe are the key factors that can enhance the credibility of elections in Zimbabwe?

2. In your opinion, how has the political landscape influenced the potential for credible elections?

3. What are the main challenges currently hindering the conduction of credible elections in Zimbabwe?

4. What reforms would you recommend to improve the integrity of the electoral process in Zimbabwe?

Appendix C: Interview Guide for Government Officials and Politicians

Preamble

My name is Sharon Nyamadzawo, I am a student of Peace and Governance Studies at Bindura University of Education (BUSE). I am studying for a bachelor's degree program in the field. To fulfil my studies, I'm writing a research paper on the credibility of elections. The tittle of my paper is Possibility of Holding Credible Elections in African Countries: A Case Study of Zimbabwe.

The information obtained during this interview will be used only for academic purposes. Anonymity will also be ensured.

Interview questions

1. What do you believe are the key factors that could lead to credible elections in Zimbabwe?

2. How do you view the current political environment in terms of its ability to support free and fair elections?

3. What specific challenges have you faced or observed that impact the fairness of elections in your community?

4. What reforms or changes do you think are necessary to ensure more credible elections in Zimbabwe?

Appendix D: Questionnaire Guide for Voters

Preamble

My name is Sharon Nyamadzawo, I am a student of Peace and Governance Studies at Bindura University of Education (BUSE). I am studying for a bachelor's degree program in the field. To fulfil my studies, I'm writing a research paper on the credibility of elections. The tittle of my paper is Possibility of Holding Credible Elections in African Countries: A Case Study of Zimbabwe.

The information obtained during this interview will be used only for academic purposes. Anonymity will also be ensured.

1. What do you believe are the key factors that can enhance the credibility of elections in Zimbabwe?
(Please list your key factors below)

_____
_____
_____
_____

2. In your opinion, how has the political landscape influenced the potential for credible elections?
(Please provide your thoughts)

_____
_____
_____
_____

3. What are the main challenges currently hindering the conduction of credible elections in Zimbabwe?
(Please list the challenges you identify)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. What reforms would you recommend to improve the integrity of the electoral process in Zimbabwe?
(Please specify your recommended reforms)

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