

Youth Political Representation: Lens to Re-imagining Constitutional and Institutional Barriers to Inclusive Governance in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Young people constitute the largest demographic group in Zimbabwe, accounting for more than seven million people yet their representation in political and governance institutions remains disproportionately low. This study examines the constitutional and institutional barriers that continue to constrain youth participation in political leadership and decision-making processes in Zimbabwe. Drawing on contemporary debates on political representation, democratic inclusion and youth participation, the research explores the extent to which existing governance structures reflect the demographic realities of the country. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilising key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis to generate data from government officials, youth advocates, legal experts, emerging political leaders and students. The findings reveal that despite recent efforts to promote youth inclusion, including the allocation of parliamentary youth quota seats, structural barriers embedded within constitutional, institutional and political systems continue to limit meaningful youth participation in governance. The study further establishes that age-based eligibility requirements, limited

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representational opportunities and entrenched political cultures contribute to the continued marginalisation of young people from influential leadership positions. The article argues that reimagining political representation in Zimbabwe requires constitutional and institutional reforms that align governance structures with the country's demographic composition. Such reforms should promote inclusive representation, strengthen youth participation in political processes and enhance democratic governance by creating opportunities for young people to contribute meaningfully to national development.

Keywords: democratic inclusion, constitutional reform, governance, youth participation

INTRODUCTION

Political representation remains one of the fundamental pillars of democratic governance because it ensures that the interests, aspirations and concerns of different social groups are reflected in public decision-making processes (Blankenship and Moadel-Attie, 2024). In contemporary democracies, youth participation has increasingly emerged as a critical component of inclusive governance, given the growing recognition that young people are not merely beneficiaries of policy decisions, but important actors in shaping political, social and economic development. According to Stockemer and Sundström (2022), the quality of democratic representation is weakened when large demographic groups remain absent from political institutions. Across the world, youth have become central participants in civic activism, governance reform, climate justice movements and democratic renewal initiatives, demonstrating their capacity to influence public policy and national development (Bahuet and Altorp, 2022). Yet despite these developments, young people continue to experience significant barriers to meaningful political representation in many countries.

The challenge of youth under-representation has become a global concern within democratic governance debates. Although young people constitute substantial proportions of national populations, their presence in parliaments, cabinets, political parties and senior leadership positions remains disproportionately low. Stockemer, Thompson and Sundström (2023) observe that young adults are consistently under-represented in elected institutions despite being among the most politically affected demographic groups. Similarly, Bessant (2020) argues that contemporary political systems continue to treat young people as political subjects rather than political actors, thereby limiting their opportunities to influence governance processes. This democratic deficit has generated growing scholarly interest in the relationship between age, representation, citizenship and political participation, particularly in societies seeking to deepen democratic inclusion and responsiveness.

Zimbabwe presents a particularly important case within these debates. Young people constitute more than seven million of the country's estimated population of 15 million and, therefore, represent the largest demographic group in the nation (ZIMSTAT, 2022). Despite this demographic significance, youth representation within formal political and governance institutions remains relatively limited. While recent efforts by the Government of Zimbabwe have sought to enhance youth participation through the creation of youth desks in ministries and the introduction of 10 reserved parliamentary seats for youth representatives, significant disparities remain between the demographic realities of the country and the actual representation of young people in political institutions (Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, 2022). This mismatch raises important questions regarding equity, democratic inclusion and the extent to which governance structures reflect the composition of the population they serve.

The contemporary challenges facing youth representation in Zimbabwe cannot be fully understood without appreciating their historical foundations. During the colonial period, African youth played a critical role in nationalist mobilisation and liberation struggles, particularly through participation in student movements, community resistance structures and liberation armies. However, colonial governance systems largely excluded Africans from meaningful political participation and leadership opportunities, creating institutional cultures that concentrated power among a small elite. Although independence in 1980 ushered in a new political dispensation grounded in majority rule and democratic participation, many institutional structures inherited from the colonial era continued to shape political representation and access to leadership. The persistence of exclusionary governance arrangements has, therefore, become a central concern within broader debates on decolonisation and democratic transformation in Zimbabwe.

One of the most significant manifestations of this challenge is the continued existence of constitutional age restrictions governing eligibility for senior public offices. Section 91 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013 requires presidential candidates to be at least 40 years old. Similarly, section 121 establishes 40 years as the minimum age for Senate membership, while sections 177 and 178 prescribe the same age threshold for appointments to the Constitutional Court and Supreme Court. These provisions effectively exclude the overwhelming majority of young Zimbabweans from occupying some of the most influential positions within the political and governance system. According to Mañko (2023), age-based political restrictions often limit democratic inclusivity by preventing younger generations from participating fully in political leadership and decision-making processes. Such

barriers become particularly problematic in societies where young people constitute the majority population.

The consequences of youth exclusion extend beyond representation alone. Research demonstrates that political systems which fail to accommodate young people often experience declining levels of political trust, civic engagement and democratic participation among younger generations. Hinze (2024) argues that young citizens are more likely to disengage from political processes when institutions appear inaccessible or unresponsive to their interests. Similarly, Bečević and Dahlstedt (2022) contend that exclusion from formal governance structures contributes to broader forms of social and political marginalisation. In Zimbabwe, these dynamics are particularly significant, given the country's youthful demographic profile and the growing importance of youth-driven innovation, digital participation and social transformation in contemporary development processes.

The issue is further complicated by persistent cultural and institutional perceptions that associate political leadership with age and seniority. While experience remains an important consideration in governance, contemporary scholarship increasingly challenges assumptions that leadership effectiveness is determined primarily by age. Daly (2020) and Battenfeld (2025) argue that cultural representation of youth significantly influence political representation outcomes, often reinforcing stereotypes that portray young people as politically inexperienced or incapable of leadership. Such perceptions create additional obstacles to youth inclusion, even when formal participation mechanisms exist. Consequently, many young people remain excluded from meaningful influence within political parties, legislative institutions and executive structures despite constitutional commitments to youth participation.

This study approaches youth political representation through a decolonial and democratic representation perspective. It argues that meaningful inclusion requires more than symbolic participation mechanisms and demands the transformation of constitutional, institutional and cultural barriers that continue to restrict youth access to political leadership. Drawing upon qualitative evidence from government officials, legal experts, youth advocates, scholars and emerging political leaders, the study examines how constitutional age restrictions and institutional arrangements shape youth representation in Zimbabwe. Particular attention is given to the implications of these barriers for democratic legitimacy, inclusive governance and political equality.

The study, therefore, seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on democratic inclusion and youth participation by examining the relationship between demographic realities and political representation in Zimbabwe. It proposes a framework for re-imagining youth political participation through constitutional reform, proportional representation mechanisms and institutional restructuring aimed at aligning governance systems with the country's youthful population. In doing so, the study positions Zimbabwe within broader global discussions concerning youth representation, democratic renewal and the decolonisation of political institutions.

The remainder of the study is organised as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework and reviews the relevant literature on youth political representation, democratic inclusion and age-based political exclusion. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach adopted for the study. The subsequent sections present the findings and discussion before concluding with policy recommendations for strengthening youth participation and inclusive governance in Zimbabwe.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in the Democratic Representation Theory and the Political Inclusion Theory. The Democratic Representation Theory is concerned with the extent to which political institutions reflect the interests, identities and demographic realities of the populations they govern (Michelsen, 2020). The theory is founded on the principle that representative democracy functions effectively when all significant social groups have meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and occupy positions of political authority (Sanbonmatsu, 2020). According to Rohrschneider and Thomassen (2020), democratic legitimacy is strengthened when political institutions mirror the diversity of society and provide equitable avenues for participation. Representation, therefore, extends beyond electoral participation and includes the capacity of different social groups to influence policy outcomes and governance processes. In this regard, the theory provides a useful framework for examining whether Zimbabwe's political institutions adequately reflect the demographic significance of young people who constitute the majority of the country's population.

Complementing this perspective is the Political Inclusion Theory, which focuses on the removal of institutional, legal and structural barriers that prevent particular groups from participating fully in governance systems (Spencer, 2021). Political inclusion is premised on the notion that democracy should not merely guarantee formal political rights but should also create conditions that enable meaningful participation by all citizens. Bessant (2020) argues that young people are frequently positioned at the margins of political citizenship through institutional arrangements that restrict their access to leadership and decision-making spaces. Similarly, Bečević and Dahlstedt (2022) contend that exclusionary governance structures often reproduce inequalities by limiting the

participation of groups that are already socially and politically disadvantaged. The theory, therefore, highlights the importance of examining how constitutional provisions, political institutions and cultural norms either facilitate or constrain youth participation in governance, (Tapia-Echanove *et al.*, 2025).

The convergence of these two theoretical perspectives provides an appropriate lens through which to analyse youth political representation in Zimbabwe. The Democratic Representation Theory draws attention to the disparity between the country's youthful demographic profile and the relatively limited presence of young people within political leadership structures. The Political Inclusion Theory, on the other hand, enables an examination of the constitutional and institutional mechanisms that produce and sustain this disparity. Together, the theories suggest that genuine democratic governance requires both representative outcomes and inclusive institutional arrangements. Where significant demographic groups remain excluded from positions of influence, questions inevitably arise regarding the legitimacy, responsiveness and inclusiveness of governance systems.

When applied to the Zimbabwean context, these theories illuminate the implications of constitutional age restrictions and institutional barriers for youth participation. Sections 91, 121, 177 and 178 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, establish minimum age requirements of 40 years for presidential candidates, senators and judges of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts. While these provisions may have been intended to ensure experience and maturity in public office, they simultaneously exclude the majority of young citizens from accessing senior political positions. Wall (2022) argues that democratic systems become less representative when age-based restrictions limit opportunities for younger generations to participate in political leadership. Similarly, Eichhorn and

Bergh (2020) demonstrate that lowering age-related political barriers can enhance democratic participation and strengthen political engagement among younger citizens.

Three important insights emerge from the reviewed theories. First, democratic governance requires political institutions to reflect the demographic realities of the populations they represent. Second, meaningful inclusion demands the removal of institutional and constitutional barriers that restrict participation by particular social groups. Third, political representation should not be understood solely as electoral participation, but also as access to leadership, policy influence and decision-making authority. Collectively, these insights provide a conceptual foundation for examining youth political representation in Zimbabwe and for proposing reforms aimed at creating a more inclusive governance framework that aligns with the country's demographic realities and democratic aspirations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth political representation has emerged as a critical area of scholarly inquiry within contemporary democratic governance debates. Increasing attention has been directed towards understanding the extent to which political institutions reflect the demographic composition of societies and whether young people are adequately represented in decision-making structures (Hatfield, 2025) . According to Stockemer and Sundström (2022), young adults remain one of the most under-represented social groups in parliaments, cabinets and electoral candidacies across the world despite constituting a significant proportion of national populations. This disparity raises important questions regarding democratic legitimacy and political inclusion. Democratic governance is strengthened when political institutions mirror social realities of the populations they serve, while persistent exclusion undermines

public confidence in governance systems and weakens democratic participation. Wall (2022) similarly argues that representative institutions derive legitimacy from their ability to accommodate diverse social groups, including youth, whose interests and aspirations are often distinct from those of older generations.

The growing body of literature on youth political participation suggests that youth exclusion is not merely a demographic issue, but a structural challenge embedded within political institutions (Hastings, 2022). Stockemer, Thompson and Sundström (2023) observe that young people remain significantly under-represented in electoral politics because political systems often favour older and more established candidates. Likewise, Bessant (2020) contends that age-based assumptions continue to shape political participation, resulting in the perception that youth lack the experience and maturity required for leadership. Such perceptions contribute to institutional barriers that restrict young people's access to political office and reinforce existing power hierarchies. As a result, democratic systems frequently fail to translate numerical youth majorities into meaningful political representation.

The relationship between constitutional arrangements and youth political participation has also attracted considerable scholarly attention. Scholars increasingly argue that age-related constitutional restrictions create structural barriers that prevent young people from competing for influential political positions. Eichhorn and Bergh (2020) demonstrate that lowering age thresholds for political participation broadens democratic inclusion and encourages greater youth engagement in governance processes. Similarly, Maňko (2023) notes that age qualifications for public office often reflect historical political assumptions, rather than contemporary democratic realities. Such restrictions may, therefore, limit opportunities for capable

young leaders to participate in governance despite possessing the qualifications and competencies necessary for leadership. The literature consequently suggests that constitutional frameworks play a significant role in either facilitating or constraining youth political inclusion.

The issue of proportional representation has become central within contemporary debates on youth inclusion (Jenkins, 2024). According to Rohrschneider and Thomassen (2020), representative democracy functions most effectively when political institutions reflect the social and demographic composition of the population. This argument has encouraged growing support for affirmative mechanisms such as youth quotas and reserved seats. Bessant (2020) argues that quota systems provide practical avenues for correcting historical inequalities in political representation by creating opportunities for marginalised groups to access decision-making structures. However, scholars caution that quotas alone may not guarantee substantive representation if they fail to correspond with demographic realities or if broader institutional barriers remain intact. Consequently, discussions increasingly focus on the quality and proportionality of youth representation, rather than merely the existence of youth-focused political programmes.

Beyond institutional barriers, cultural and societal perceptions also influence youth participation in governance. Battenfeld (2025) argues that cultural representations of young people significantly shape public perceptions regarding their suitability for political leadership. In many societies, youth are often portrayed as inexperienced, politically immature or lacking the capacity to govern effectively. Such representations contribute to the normalisation of youth exclusion from positions of authority. Similarly, Sandin, Hanson and Balagopalan (2023) maintain that meaningful political representation requires recognising young people as legitimate political actors capable

of contributing to governance and policy development. These findings suggest that enhancing youth participation requires both institutional reforms and broader societal transformations regarding perceptions of leadership and political authority.

Scholarly literature further highlights the consequences of youth exclusion for democratic participation. Hinze (2024) observes that when young people perceive political institutions as inaccessible, they are more likely to disengage from formal political processes. This disengagement often manifests through declining voter turnout, reduced trust in political institutions and growing scepticism towards governance systems. Antkowiak (2023) similarly argues that political alienation among young people frequently results in alternative forms of civic engagement outside formal political structures. While such participation remains important, persistent exclusion from formal governance limits the ability of youth to influence national policy and decision-making processes. The literature, therefore, identifies youth political representation as both a democratic necessity and a mechanism for sustaining long-term political legitimacy.

A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY REFLECTION OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL ZIMBABWE

The exclusion of young people from political decision-making in Zimbabwe has deep historical roots. During the colonial period, political participation was restricted largely through racial and institutional structures that denied the African majority meaningful access to governance. Young Africans were particularly marginalised and were confined largely to educational and labour systems designed to sustain colonial administration. Although formal political participation was restricted, young people became central actors within nationalist movements that challenged colonial rule. Jacobsson (2020) notes that youth-led activism has historically played a

critical role in challenging exclusionary political systems and advancing social transformation. In Zimbabwe, students, young workers and youth activists became important participants in the liberation struggle, contributing significantly to the attainment of independence.

Despite their contributions to the liberation movement, post-independence Zimbabwe did not fundamentally transform youth representation within governance structures. While political rhetoric increasingly celebrated youth as future leaders, political authority remained concentrated among older generations. The persistence of age-based barriers and elite-centred political structures resulted in the continued marginalisation of youth from influential political offices. This phenomenon reflects what Giroux (2022) describes as the contradiction between recognising the potential of young people and simultaneously limiting their access to power. Consequently, many of the exclusionary tendencies associated with colonial governance continued to shape political participation in the postcolonial era.

Recent scholarship suggests that contemporary efforts to increase youth participation indicate a gradual shift towards greater inclusivity. Todres, Choi and Wright (2023) argue that rights-based approaches to youth participation provide important foundations for expanding democratic inclusion and strengthening governance systems. Similarly, Bečević and Dahlstedt (2022) emphasise that meaningful youth participation requires institutional reforms capable of addressing historical inequalities and structural exclusion. These perspectives support the argument that enhancing youth representation in Zimbabwe requires constitutional, institutional and cultural reforms that move beyond symbolic inclusion towards substantive participation. Within this context, the present study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by examining how

constitutional barriers, institutional structures and historical legacies continue to shape youth political representation in Zimbabwe and by proposing pathways towards a more inclusive governance framework.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which assumes that knowledge is socially constructed through human experiences, interactions and interpretations. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to explore how different stakeholders understand and experience youth political representation in Zimbabwe, particularly in relation to constitutional age restrictions, institutional barriers and broader governance structures. The constructivist orientation enabled the research to capture diverse perspectives regarding youth inclusion and exclusion within political decision-making processes.

A cross-sectional case study design was employed to examine youth political representation within Zimbabwe's contemporary governance context. The case study approach allowed for an in-depth investigation of the legal, institutional and socio-political factors shaping youth participation in governance. The study focuses on Zimbabwe as a single case while drawing insights from participants directly involved in youth advocacy, governance, political leadership and constitutional affairs. The design was suitable because it facilitated a contextual understanding of the phenomenon within its real-life setting.

The target population comprised government officials, legal experts, youth advocates, emerging political leaders, scholars in political science and law, civil society actors involved in youth advocacy and university students. Participants were selected through purposive and convenience sampling techniques to

ensure the inclusion of individuals with specialised knowledge and practical experience regarding youth participation in governance. The study conducted 15 key informant and in-depth interviews involving officials from youth-related government departments, governance experts, legal practitioners, youth activists and emerging political leaders. In addition, three focus group discussions (FGDs) consisting of 12 participants each were organised with political science students, law students and youth activists. The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection ceased when no new themes emerged.

Data were collected using key informant interview guides, in-depth interview guides, FGD interview guides and document analysis. Interview guides were developed following an extensive review of literature on youth political participation and democratic representation. The guides were pre-tested among a small group of University of Zimbabwe students to enhance clarity and relevance. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in English, with a research assistant helping with note-taking and audio recording. Field notes were maintained throughout the data collection process to capture contextual observations and reflections.

Document analysis was employed to complement primary data sources. Key documents reviewed included the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013, electoral legislation, parliamentary debates and national youth policy documents. These sources provided important insights into the legal and institutional frameworks governing youth participation and political representation.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis framework. Interview and FGD recordings were transcribed verbatim before coding and analysis. The

process involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, naming and defining themes and report writing. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns relating to constitutional exclusions, institutional barriers, cultural perceptions of leadership and opportunities for enhancing youth political representation. To strengthen the credibility of findings, methodological triangulation was achieved through the integration of interview, FGD and document analysis data.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained before interviews and discussions commenced. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without prejudice. Pseudonyms were used during transcription and analysis to protect participants' identities. Formal permission to engage government officials and youth organisations was sought through appropriate institutional channels before data collection commenced.

FINDINGS

The qualitative data generated from 15 key informant and in-depth interviews, three FGDs comprising 36 participants and document analysis revealed four major themes regarding youth political representation in Zimbabwe. These themes were: constitutional age-based exclusion, inadequate youth representation mechanisms, institutional and cultural barriers to participation, and the implications of youth exclusion for democratic governance. The findings demonstrate that although Zimbabwe has introduced measures aimed at promoting youth participation, significant structural obstacles continue to limit meaningful youth representation in political leadership and decision-making processes.

CONSTITUTIONAL AGE RESTRICTIONS AS INSTRUMENTS OF POLITICAL EXCLUSION

One of the most dominant themes emerging from interviews and FGDs was the perception that constitutional age requirements constitute a significant barrier to youth political participation. Participants consistently argued that provisions contained in sections 91, 121, 177 and 178 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe create structural exclusion by preventing young people from contesting senior political and judicial positions. Government officials, youth advocates and university students alike expressed concern that the minimum age requirement of 40 years for presidential candidates, senators and judges effectively excludes the majority of Zimbabwean youth from accessing influential leadership positions.

Several participants viewed these restrictions as contradictory to the constitutional commitment to youth empowerment and participation. Youth advocates argued that while young people are considered mature enough to vote, pay taxes and participate in national development, they remain legally restricted from seeking some of the highest offices in the country. Participants further noted that age thresholds reinforce perceptions that leadership is the preserve of older generations, thereby discouraging young people from actively pursuing political careers. Document analysis also revealed a tension between section 20 of the Constitution, which promotes youth participation in governance and other constitutional provisions that limit youth access to senior leadership positions.

INADEQUATE REPRESENTATION WITHIN EXISTING POLITICAL STRUCTURES

The second theme concerned the inadequacy of current mechanisms designed to promote youth representation. Participants acknowledged that the introduction of 10 youth-quota seats in Parliament represents a positive step towards

inclusion. However, most respondents argued that the quota system remains insufficient when compared to the demographic realities of Zimbabwe, where young people constitute the majority of the population.

Focus group participants repeatedly expressed concern that the allocation of the 10 parliamentary seats does not provide meaningful influence over legislative processes. Some respondents described the quota as symbolic, rather than transformative because it offers limited opportunities for youth participation in decision-making. Key informants from governance and youth organisations similarly argued that youth representation remains concentrated in lower-level structures while strategic decision-making positions continue to be dominated by older political actors.

Analysis of policy and constitutional documents further revealed that, unlike gender representation, which benefits from broader constitutional and legislative support mechanisms, youth representation remains limited to a relatively small quota arrangement. Participants, therefore, perceived a significant mismatch between the demographic weight of young people and their actual presence in governance institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS TO YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Beyond constitutional restrictions, participants identified a range of institutional and socio-cultural barriers that continue to marginalise youth within political processes. Interview respondents noted that political parties often prioritise seniority, experience and long-standing political networks when selecting candidates for leadership positions. As a result, young aspiring leaders frequently struggle to gain access to influential positions within political organisations.

Many participants also highlighted economic constraints as a major obstacle. Young people often lack the financial resources required to participate effectively in political campaigns, attend party structures or compete against established political actors. Respondents argued that financial barriers disproportionately affect youth, particularly those from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Cultural perceptions of leadership also emerged as an important theme. Participants observed that many communities continue to associate leadership with age and experience, creating scepticism towards younger candidates. Focus group discussions revealed that while attitudes are gradually changing, age-based stereotypes remain deeply embedded within both political institutions and society. These perceptions often undermine the legitimacy of young leaders even when they possess the qualifications and competencies necessary for leadership roles.

IMPLICATIONS OF YOUTH EXCLUSION FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The final theme focused on the broader consequences of youth under-representation for governance and democratic development. Participants widely agreed that excluding young people from political leadership weakens the inclusiveness and responsiveness of democratic institutions. Respondents argued that issues affecting young people, such as employment, education, innovation and digital transformation, often receive inadequate attention because youth perspectives are under-represented in policy-making processes.

Several interviewees further noted that persistent exclusion contributes to political disengagement among young citizens. Participants indicated that many youths perceive politics as inaccessible and dominated by older generations, resulting in declining interest in formal political participation. Focus group

participants suggested that increased youth representation could strengthen trust in political institutions and encourage greater civic engagement among younger citizens.

At the same time, respondents acknowledged the growing role of digital platforms and youth-led advocacy movements in expanding political participation outside traditional governance structures. However, participants maintained that meaningful inclusion requires the translation of youth activism into formal representation within political institutions. The findings, therefore suggest that enhancing youth representation is not merely a question of demographic fairness, but a necessary condition for strengthening inclusive governance and democratic legitimacy in Zimbabwe.

These findings demonstrate that constitutional restrictions, limited quota mechanisms, institutional barriers and cultural perceptions collectively contribute to the underrepresentation of youth in Zimbabwean politics. While important steps have been taken to promote youth participation, respondents overwhelmingly viewed existing measures as insufficient to achieve meaningful and proportionate representation within governance structures.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that youth political underrepresentation in Zimbabwe is not simply a demographic anomaly, but a consequence of entrenched constitutional, institutional and socio-cultural structures that continue to shape access to political leadership. Although Zimbabwe has adopted measures aimed at promoting youth participation, including the introduction of 10 youth quota seats in Parliament and constitutional provisions encouraging youth involvement in governance, the study reveals that these initiatives have not translated into meaningful representation.

This finding reinforces the argument advanced by Stockemer and Sundström (2022), that young people remain significantly under-represented in political institutions across many democracies despite constituting substantial proportions of national populations. In the Zimbabwean context, the disconnect between the numerical dominance of youth and their limited presence in decision-making structures, raises important questions regarding the inclusiveness and representativeness of contemporary governance systems.

A central finding of this study is that constitutional age restrictions continue to operate as significant barriers to youth political participation. Participants consistently identified the age requirements prescribed in sections 91, 121, 177 and 178 of the Constitution as mechanisms that restrict access to senior political and judicial offices. These findings support the observations of Mañko (2023), who argues that age thresholds in political systems often function as exclusionary mechanisms which limit the participation of younger citizens in governance. Similarly, Wall (2022) contends that democratic systems become less representative when entire demographic groups are legally prevented from competing for influential political positions. The findings, therefore, suggest that while constitutional provisions promoting youth participation exist, other constitutional clauses simultaneously constrain meaningful youth inclusion, creating a contradiction within the governance framework itself.

The findings further reveal that existing youth representation mechanisms are largely symbolic, rather than transformative. Participants acknowledged the importance of the parliamentary youth quota but questioned its effectiveness in addressing the broader challenge of youth exclusion. This observation resonates with Stockemer, Thompson and Sundström (2023), who note that descriptive representation alone is insufficient

unless it is accompanied by meaningful opportunities for political influence and participation. The allocation of 10 parliamentary seats to youth representatives may enhance visibility, but it does not adequately reflect the demographic realities of a country where young people constitute the majority of the population. Consequently, the study confirms that numerical inclusion without proportional influence risks reinforcing rather than eliminating political marginalisation.

Beyond constitutional provisions, the findings indicate that institutional practices within political parties continue to disadvantage younger political actors. Participants highlighted how candidate selection processes often prioritise seniority, political experience and established networks, thereby limiting opportunities for emerging leaders. These findings are consistent with Bečević and Dahlstedt (2022), who argue that youth exclusion frequently occurs through institutional arrangements that privilege older political elites, while restricting access for younger generations. Such practices contribute to a political culture in which youth participation is encouraged rhetorically, but constrained practically. The result is a governance system that reproduces existing power structures and limits generational renewal within political institutions.

The study also highlights the influence of socio-cultural perceptions in shaping political participation. Participants noted that leadership continues to be associated with age, experience and seniority, resulting in scepticism towards younger political candidates. This finding aligns with Bessant (2020), who observes that young people are often viewed as political apprentices rather than legitimate political actors capable of exercising leadership. Such perceptions reinforce exclusionary attitudes that undermine youth confidence and limit public acceptance of younger leaders. The persistence of age-based

assumptions demonstrates that youth exclusion extends beyond legal frameworks and is embedded within broader societal understandings of authority and leadership.

Another significant finding concerns the relationship between youth exclusion and democratic legitimacy. Participants expressed concerns that the continued marginalisation of youth weakens confidence in political institutions and contributes to political disengagement. This finding corresponds with Antkowiak (2023), who argues that limited representation often discourages political participation among younger citizens and encourages alternative forms of civic engagement outside formal political institutions. Similarly, Hinze (2024) maintains that meaningful democratic participation requires citizens to perceive political systems as accessible and responsive to their interests. The exclusion of young people from leadership positions, therefore, has implications not only for representation, but also for broader democratic participation and trust in governance structures.

The findings further suggest that youth exclusion has important developmental implications. Participants argued that issues affecting young people, including employment, innovation, education and digital transformation, often receive insufficient policy attention due to limited youth representation in decision-making processes. This observation supports Giroux's (2022) argument that young people contribute unique perspectives, creativity and future-oriented approaches to governance. In an era increasingly shaped by technological transformation and digital citizenship, the exclusion of younger generations from leadership positions may limit the responsiveness and adaptability of governance institutions. Consequently, enhancing youth representation should not be viewed merely as a matter of political fairness but also as a strategic requirement for inclusive and sustainable development.

Viewed through the lens of the Democratic Representation Theory, the findings demonstrate that the legitimacy of representative institutions depends upon their capacity to reflect the demographic composition and interests of the populations they govern. Sandin, Hanson and Balagopalan (2023) argue that democratic representation is strengthened when governance structures accommodate diverse social groups and perspectives. In Zimbabwe, however, the persistence of constitutional restrictions, limited quota arrangements, institutional barriers and cultural perceptions of leadership collectively constrain youth participation. The findings, therefore, suggest the need for a re-imagining of political representation that moves beyond symbolic inclusion towards substantive participation. Such a shift would require constitutional reforms, strengthened youth representation mechanisms and institutional changes that create meaningful pathways for young people to participate in governance.

The discussion confirms that youth political under-representation in Zimbabwe is rooted in interconnected constitutional, institutional and socio-cultural barriers. While notable efforts have been made to advance youth participation, existing measures remain insufficient to achieve inclusive governance. Addressing these challenges requires a governance framework that recognises young people not merely as future leaders, but as legitimate political actors whose participation is essential for democratic legitimacy, policy innovation and sustainable national development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the constitutional and institutional barriers that continue to constrain youth political representation in Zimbabwe despite the country's predominantly youthful demographic profile. Drawing on qualitative data generated through key informant interviews, in-

depth interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis, the study established that a significant gap exists between the demographic reality of Zimbabwe and the representation of young people within formal political and governance institutions. Although recent reforms such as the allocation of 10 youth quota seats in Parliament demonstrate a growing recognition of youth inclusion, the findings indicate that these measures remain insufficient to achieve meaningful and proportionate representation.

The study further established that constitutional age restrictions embedded in sections 91, 121, 177 and 178 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe continue to exclude a substantial proportion of young citizens from occupying senior political and judicial offices. These provisions create a contradiction between the constitutional commitment to youth participation under section 20 and the practical realities of access to political leadership. Beyond legal barriers, the research identified institutional, economic and socio-cultural factors that collectively reinforce youth exclusion, including limited access to political resources, entrenched age-based perceptions of leadership and political structures that favour the established elite over emerging young leaders.

The findings demonstrate that youth exclusion is not merely a representational deficit, but a broader governance challenge. The continued marginalisation of the country's largest demographic group weakens democratic legitimacy, reduces political responsiveness to youth concerns and limits opportunities for innovation and intergenerational participation in public decision-making. In an era increasingly shaped by digital transformation, technological innovation and changing social realities, governance systems that fail to incorporate youthful perspectives risk becoming disconnected from the needs and aspirations of the majority population.

The study, therefore, concludes that achieving inclusive governance in Zimbabwe requires a deliberate re-imagining of constitutional and institutional arrangements governing political participation. Inclusive governance should not be understood solely as the inclusion of youth as voters or political supporters, but as their meaningful participation in leadership, policy formulation and decision-making processes. Such reforms would contribute towards strengthening democratic legitimacy, enhancing political accountability and ensuring that governance structures reflect the demographic realities of contemporary Zimbabwe.

To address these challenges, the study recommends:

CONSTITUTIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

For authentic youth participation in governance, Zimbabwe should initiate constitutional and institutional changes. This entails revising age-related regulations that prevent youth from running for important political positions. Sections 91, 121 and 177-178 of the 2013 Constitution establish a minimum age of 40 years for presidential, vice-presidential, senatorial and judicial roles, the criteria that ought to be reduced to 21 years to enable competent young leaders to engage. The Senate, while including traditional leaders and various groups, presently dismisses youth voices because of these age limitations, undermining equitable representation. A minimum of 30-40% of Senate positions ought to be designated for young individuals to mirror their demographic majority and comply with section 20 of the Constitution, advocating for youth engagement. Likewise, the youth representation in Parliament should increase from the present 10 seats to encompass 30-40% of the legislative body. This would guarantee a more equitable power distribution, correspond with demographic realities and meet constitutional requirements for inclusive governance.

POLITICAL PARTY AND LEADERSHIP REFORMS

Equally important are reforms in political parties and leadership that focus on improving youth participation at both party and national levels. Political parties should be required by law to implement proportional representation grounded in demographic statistics, if 60% of the population is under 35, then 60% of candidates ought to mirror that situation. Section 17, which requires equal representation for marginalised groups, endorses these reforms. Additionally, the ZANU-PF Youth League must advocate for the creation of a third vice president post to be set aside for a youth delegate. This reflects the effective example established by the Women's League in achieving a female vice president in the wake of the millennium. Finally, societal norms that link age to leadership ability should be questioned through public initiatives that showcase accomplished young leaders and foster intergenerational confidence. Section 17 once more establishes a constitutional basis for altering views and validating the potential of youth in leadership roles.

EMPOWERING THE YOUTH ECONOMICALLY AND BOOSTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Ultimately, economically empowering young people and enhancing civic participation are crucial for lasting political inclusion. Initiatives aimed at youth, including mentorship programmes, leadership training and access to campaign funding, should be prioritised to overcome the economic obstacles that hinder political involvement. These initiatives correspond with section 20, which advocates for empowering youth in governance. Enhancing civic education will also foster a politically conscious generation. Initiatives that promote voter registration and participation, particularly through online channels, can diminish apathy and strengthen section 67, which assures the right to engage in free and fair elections. Moreover, strengthening a National Youth Advocacy Council

would formalise youth perspectives in policy decisions and act as a connection between young individuals and the government. This entity would be essential in ensuring that the issues of young people are continually incorporated into national governance frameworks in accordance with constitutional values.

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