BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

AN EXAMINATION OF STRATEGIES THE ZIMBABWE ELECTORAL COMMISSION CAN EMPLOY TO BUILD PUBLIC TRUST IN ZIMBABWE

BY

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF PEACE AND GOVERNANCE IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT FOR THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN PEACE AND GOVERNANCE DEGREE

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study examined strategies that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) can employ to build public trust in Zimbabwe. The research was motivated by a persistent trust deficit in ZEC, with Afrobarometer (2022) reporting that only 38% of Zimbabweans trusted the Commission, posing a severe threat to electoral legitimacy and democratic stability. The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design with 50 survey respondents recruited through stratified random sampling and 15 key informants selected through purposive sampling. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of qualitative data and descriptive statistics of quantitative data revealed four major findings. First, there is a severe trust deficit, with 64% of respondents distrusting ZEC's ability to manage elections fairly and 70% distrusting the accuracy of its results. Second, operational factors eroding trust included perceived political influence in commissioner appointments (70%), unequal treatment of political parties (66%), and a non-verifiable results management system described as a "black box." Third, comparative analysis revealed valuable lessons from Ghana's Inter-Party Advisory Committee, Kenya's technological reforms, and Botswana's consistent professionalism. Fourth, despite the deep trust deficit, 60% of respondents expressed willingness to trust ZEC if meaningful transparency reforms were implemented. The study concluded that rebuilding trust is possible through evidence-based strategies focused on results transparency, stakeholder engagement, institutional culture change, and legal reform. Recommendations included implementing a verifiable real-time results management system, reforming the commissioner appointment process to include public scrutiny, establishing a permanent consultative forum modelled on Ghana's IPAC, and amending the Electoral Act to close transparency gaps.

Keywords: public trust, electoral integrity, Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, electoral management body, transparency, stakeholder engagement

DECLARATION

I B222293B, hereby declare that this dissertation titled *"An Examination of Strategies the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission can Employ to Build Public Trust in Zimbabwe"* is my own original work. It has not been submitted previously for any degree or examination at any other university. All sources of information, including quotations, published literature, and data from other researchers, have been duly acknowledged using the APA referencing style.

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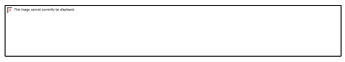
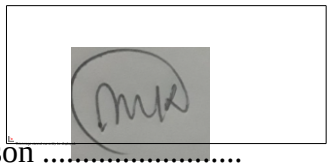
Student  Date 27/08/2026



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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, whose unwavering support and encouragement have been my anchor throughout this academic journey. To my parents, thank you for believing in me and for the sacrifices you have made to ensure my education. To the people of Zimbabwe, may this work contribute, in however small a way, to strengthening the democratic institutions that serve you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my research supervisor for his invaluable guidance, patience, and constructive criticism throughout this study. Without their mentorship, this dissertation would not have been completed.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Abbreviation	Meaning
BUSE	Bindura University of Science Education
CCC	Citizens Coalition for Change
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EC	Electoral Commission (Ghana)
EMB	Electoral Management Body
IEBC	Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (Kenya)
IEC	Independent Electoral Commission (Botswana)
IPAC	Inter-Party Advisory Committee
SADC	Southern African Development Community
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front
ZEC	Zimbabwe Electoral Commission
ZESN	Zimbabwe Election Support Network

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Public trust in electoral processes is the bedrock of any functioning democracy, serving as the fundamental source of democratic legitimacy (Norris, 2014). Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) are the institutions tasked with the sacred duty of organizing, managing, and overseeing these processes to ensure they are free, fair, and credible. Globally, the declining trust in democratic institutions has placed EMBs under intense scrutiny, with organizations like the United Nations emphasizing that transparent electoral management is paramount for fostering citizen confidence and preventing conflict (United Nations, 2020). When an EMB is perceived as biased, incompetent, or opaque, the entire political process is called into question, often leading to electoral disputes, political instability, and violence, thereby undermining the social contract (Alvarez, Hall, & Hyde, 2018). The challenge of building independent and trusted EMBs is particularly acute in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

The region's history of dominant party states and liberation movements has often created an environment where EMBs are viewed as extensions of the ruling regime rather than neutral arbiters (Bekoe, 2018). This is evidenced by significant public scrutiny and legal challenges faced by commissions in countries like Zambia and Malawi over perceived operational inefficiencies and lack of transparency (Dulani, 2015). Despite the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2015) explicitly calling for transparency, independence, and efficiency, achieving these standards remains a persistent hurdle. In Zimbabwe, this problem is not just acute but historically deep-seated. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), established under the

2013 Constitution, was designed to be an independent body to manage elections and repair the legitimacy of a deeply flawed electoral history (Zimbabwe Government, 2013). However, its operations have been consistently mired in controversy.

Allegations of biased conduct, opaque voter registration and ballot printing processes, and a general perceived lack of transparency have plagued the 2018 and 2023 general elections (Masunungure & Bratton, 2021; ZESN, 2023). This has resulted in a profound crisis of confidence, where a significant portion of the electorate and opposition political parties routinely question the legitimacy of electoral outcomes, leading to political disputes and stunting the nation's democratic progress (Ndlovu, 2022). It is within this critical context of global norms, regional challenges, and Zimbabwe's specific trust deficit that this study is situated.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to propose actionable and context-specific strategies that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission can employ to build and sustain public trust.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) suffers from a critical deficit of public trust, which poses a severe threat to the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and the stability of Zimbabwe's democracy. This problem manifests from persistent perceptions of partiality, operational opacity, and the historical baggage associated with electoral management in the country. The consequences are multifaceted: electoral results are routinely contested, often sparking political violence; voter apathy is increasing, as evidenced by the significant discrepancy between high voter registration and lower actual turnout in the 2023 elections; and the overall social contract between the state and its citizens is severely weakened (ZESN, 2023). An Afrobarometer (2022) survey starkly

revealed this crisis, indicating that only 38% of Zimbabweans trusted the ZEC—a figure significantly lower than trust in traditional leaders and the military. This demonstrates a alarming lack of confidence in a pivotal democratic institution. Without effective, evidence-based strategies to address this trust deficit, Zimbabwe's cycles of contested elections and political instability are likely to persist.

1.4 Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the prevailing levels and determinants of public trust in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission.

2. To identify and evaluate the specific operational factors that contribute to the erosion of trust in ZEC's operations and integrity.

3. To examine comparative trust-building strategies employed by electoral management bodies in other African nations, such as Botswana and Kenya.

1.5 Research Questions7

To achieve the above objectives, the study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the current perceptions and levels of trust among citizens, political parties, and civil society organizations towards the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission?

2. Which specific operational and procedural aspects of ZEC's work (e.g., voter registration, ballot design, results management) are most prone to distrust and why?

3. To what extent does the existing legal and institutional framework facilitate or hinder ZEC's capacity to operate as an independent and transparent body?

4. What lessons can ZEC learn from the trust-building strategies of EMBs regarded as successful within the SADC region and Africa?

5. What comprehensive strategies can be recommended to ZEC to improve its public engagement, transparency, and operational efficiency to build trust?

1.6 Assumptions of the Study

The study is guided by the following assumptions: It is assumed that respondents will provide honest and accurate responses regarding their perceptions of ZEC, despite the politically sensitive nature of the topic. It is assumed that building public trust is a desired goal for the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and that the institution is open to reform-oriented recommendations.

1.7 Significance of the Study

For the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC):

This study will provide ZEC with a detailed, evidence-based roadmap of strategies to enhance public trust. By identifying operational weaknesses, transparency gaps, and areas prone to distrust, the findings will help ZEC design targeted interventions to improve voter confidence and credibility in electoral processes.

For political parties:

The study will offer political parties an objective framework for evaluating ZEC’s performance. With clearer insights into the determinants of public trust, parties can engage

constructively with the commission, participate in oversight mechanisms, and advocate for reforms that strengthen electoral integrity.

For civil society organizations (CSOs):

Civil society organizations will benefit from practical recommendations to hold ZEC accountable while fostering informed citizen participation. The study highlights areas where CSOs can support monitoring, civic education, and engagement strategies that promote transparency and inclusivity.

For the academic community:

This research contributes a comprehensive case study on electoral governance in a transitional democracy. By analyzing Zimbabwe in the context of comparative lessons from other African states, the study advances scholarly understanding of institutional trust, operational integrity, and democratic consolidation.

1.8 Delimitations of the Study

This study is delimited to an examination of strategies for building public trust in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. It focuses primarily on the electoral cycles from 2013 (the establishment of the constitutional ZEC) to the present (2023). Geographically, it is confined to Zimbabwe, with data collection focused on selected key provinces.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

The study may face limitations including potential respondent bias due to the political sensitivity of the topic; this will be mitigated by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Gaining access to senior ZEC officials for interviews may be challenging and will be addressed through

persistent use of formal channels and professional networks. The sample size, due to resource constraints, may not be fully nationally representative, but careful stratified sampling techniques will be employed to optimize the credibility and generalizability of the findings.

1.10 Definition of Key Terms

Public Trust: The belief among citizens that an institution is reliable, competent, honest, and acting in the public's best interest (Norris, 2014).

Electoral Management Body (EMB): An organization responsible for organizing and overseeing elections, such as an independent electoral commission (López-Pintor, 2010).

Electoral Integrity: The extent to which an election adheres to international standards and best practices, being free from fraud and malpractice (Norris, 2014).

Transparency: The principle of operating in an open manner where processes, decisions, and data are accessible and visible to stakeholders (Birch & van Ham, 2017).

1.11 Dissertation Outline

The dissertation is structured into five chapters.

Chapter One introduces the study.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive literature review and theoretical framework.

Chapter Three details the research methodology.

Chapter Four presents, analyzes, and discusses the research findings.

Chapter Five provides a summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a synthesis of scholarly literature pertinent to public trust in Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs). It establishes the theoretical foundations of the study, reviews global and regional discourses on electoral governance, and delves into detailed comparative case studies of Ghana and Kenya, which offer lessons for trust-building. The chapter narrows its focus to the Zimbabwean context, analysing the specific challenges faced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). Finally, it identifies salient gaps in the existing literature that this research aims to fill, thereby positioning the study within the broader academic conversation on democratic consolidation and institutional legitimacy.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored upon two complementary theoretical frameworks that provide a multidimensional lens for analysing the construction and erosion of public trust in electoral institutions: Institutional Theory and Social Trust Theory.

2.2.1 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory by North (1990), posits that institutions are not merely organizations but are the "rules of the game" in a society comprising formal and informal constraints. The legitimacy of an institution is derived from its perceived adherence to these rules, its consistency, predictability, and impartiality (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Applied to EMBs, this theory suggests that trust is a rational calculation based on the institution's demonstrated performance against established norms of independence and technical competence (Mozaffar, 2002).

Levitsky and Murillo (2009) further distinguish between institutional and institutional stability. An EMB may have strong legal foundations but weak operational capacity or be subject to political capture, leading to a decoupling between its formal mandate and its actual functioning. This decoupling is a primary source of legitimacy crises. An EMB might be constitutionally independent but its commissioners may be perceived as politically aligned or its operational processes may be technically flawed. This theoretical lens is crucial for analysing ZEC, whose constitutional mandate for independence is often contested by allegations of partisan influence and operational opacity (Masunungure, 2018).

2.2.2 Social Trust Theory

While Institutional Theory explains trust from a performance-based, rational perspective, Social Trust Theory delves into its sociological and psychological dimensions. Uslaner (2002) provides a critical distinction between strategic trust and moralistic trust. Strategic trust is particularized and experiential; it is built through repeated, positive interactions with a specific institution. Moralistic trust, conversely, is a generalized belief in the honesty and integrity of others and institutions within society; it is a broader form of social capital.

Putnam (1993; 2000) famously argued that such generalized trust is the bedrock of effective democracies, facilitating cooperation and reducing transaction costs. In Zimbabwe, where historical experiences have eroded moralistic trust in public institutions, EMBs like ZEC cannot rely on a reservoir of goodwill. They must instead painstakingly build strategic trust through transparent actions, which over a long period may eventually help rebuild moralistic trust. Hardin’s (2002) concept of trust as "encapsulated interest" the belief that the trustee (ZEC) acts in the interest of the trustor (the citizen) further refines this. Citizens will only trust ZEC if they believe its interests are aligned with delivering a free and fair election, not with serving a particular

political party. This framework helps explain the deep-seated scepticism towards ZEC, as many citizens perceive its interests as encapsulated by the ruling party rather than the public good (Tendi, 2020).

2.3 Perspectives on Public Trust in Electoral Management Bodies

Globally, the determinants of trust in EMBs are well-established in comparative politics literature. Norris's (2022) found that Electoral Integrity Project identifies a core set of factors: perceived independence, technical competence, impartiality, transparency, and integrity. The absence of any of these can trigger a crisis of confidence. Mexico's Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE) transformed from a state-controlled entity into a globally respected model through constitutional reforms that guaranteed its autonomy, professionalized its staff, and implemented rigorous transparency mechanisms, such live-streaming electoral processes (Gonzalez, 2021). India's Election Commission is renowned for its formidable authority and operational efficiency in managing the world's largest elections, often taking decisive action against powerful politicians for code of conduct violations, thereby cementing its impartial image (Bhat, 2021).

The decline of trust in EMBs is often linked to executive encroachment. In Hungary and Poland, constitutional and legal reforms have systematically undermined the independence of electoral commissions, placing them under the influence of ruling parties and eroding domestic and international confidence in electoral outcomes (Mecs, 2022). Herman and Muirhead (2021), categorizes such practices as "legalistic electoral manipulation," where laws are weaponized to create an uneven playing field under a veneer of legality. These global examples highlight that while institutional design is necessary, it is insufficient without an unwavering commitment to de facto independence and transparency. The African continent presents a laboratory of contrasting experiences with EMB legitimacy. The foundational framework for many is the SADC Principles

and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2015), which explicitly call for EMB independence, transparency, and professionalism. The implementation of such regional norms is often mediated by domestic power dynamics. Nshindano and Mpundu (2025), identifies key institutional prerequisites for credible EMBs: security of tenure for commissioners to insulate them from political pressure, financial autonomy to prevent executive strangulation, and inclusive stakeholder engagement.

Botswana's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) is a success story having administered peaceful and accepted elections for decades. Its credibility is attributed to a political culture that respects electoral rules, a professional and non-partisan secretariat, and consistent operational competence (Sebudubudu & Osei-Hwedie, 2016). In contrast, EMBs in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia have faced intense criticism. In the DRC, the electoral commission has been accused of blatant bias, delaying elections, and manipulating the voter roll to favour incumbents (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). In Zambia, although the 2016 election saw a peaceful transfer of power, the Electoral Commission of Zambia was heavily criticized for its handling of the voter register and results process, highlighting the persistent challenges (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa [EISA], 2016).

2.4 Factors Eroding Trust in Electoral Management Bodies

The erosion of public trust in Electoral Management Bodies is a challenge observed across democracies worldwide. A lot of factors undermine credibility of these bodies for example at a global, regional, continental, and national levels. At the global level, a set of determinants for trust in EMBs include perceived independence, transparency, technical competence, impartiality, and integrity (Nshindano & Mpundu, 2025). The violation of these pillars can trigger a profound crisis of confidence. In established democracies, trust often declines through legalistic manipulation,

where ruling parties use their majority to pass laws that strategically advantage them, eroding the de facto independence of the EMB while maintaining a veneer of legality (Smibert, 2023). Countries like Hungary and Poland where constitutional and legal reforms have systematically placed electoral commissions under the influence of ruling parties severely damaging domestic and international confidence in electoral outcomes. Mexico's Instituto Nacional Electoral transformed from a state-controlled entity into a global model through constitutional reforms guaranteeing autonomy, professionalization of staff, and radical transparency mechanisms like the live-streaming of electoral logistics (Estrada, 2023). India's Election Commission is renowned for its formidable authority and operational efficiency, often taking decisive action against powerful politicians, thereby cementing its image of impartiality (Singh & Saxena, 2021). The global lesson is that trust is earned through demonstrable adherence to universal principles of electoral integrity, and its erosion begins when these principles are compromised.

Within the Southern African Development Community region, the challenge is not a lack of normative standards but their inconsistent implementation. The SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections explicitly call for EMB independence, transparency, and professionalism (Kariuki, 2023). The application of these regional norms is heavily mediated by domestic power dynamics, particularly in states with dominant-party systems. The region's history of liberation movements transitioning into ruling parties has often created an environment where EMBs are perceived as instruments of incumbent retention rather than neutral arbiters. In Zambia, the Electoral Commission of Zambia faced intense criticism for its handling of the voter register and the results process, despite the election resulting in a peaceful transfer of power (Chirwa, 2022). In Malawi, widespread distrust in the Malawi Electoral Commission's management of the 2019 presidential election results, including the use of correction fluid on

results sheets, led to mass protests and a landmark court case that annulled the election (Kanyang'wa & Lotshwao, 2023).

The African continent presents a tapestry of contrasting EMB legacies, further revealing the factors that build or destroy trust. A critical factor is the politicization of commissioner appointments. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the national electoral commission has been repeatedly accused of blatant bias, delaying elections, and manipulating the voter roll to favour incumbents, a direct result of its composition being dominated by presidential allies (Mulumba, 2021). The successful reform of Ghana's Electoral Commission highlights how to overcome these challenges. A key to its credibility has been the institutionalization of dialogue through the Inter-Party Advisory Committee, which fosters inclusion and pre-empts conflict by allowing parties to voice grievances before they escalate (Jimale, 2025). Kenya's journey with the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission emphasizes the double-edged nature of technology. According to Miyandazi and Tho (2025), while the introduction of biometric systems and electronic results transmission was meant to build trust, the failure of these systems in 2017, coupled with persistent doubts about the commission's internal neutrality, demonstrated that technology alone cannot compensate for a lack of institutional legitimacy. The continental perspective thus emphasizes that beyond operational factors, the broader political ecosystem and the genuine neutrality of the human elements within the EMB are paramount.

In Zimbabwe, the global, regional, and continental factors eroding trust converge into an acute and persistent crisis for the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. The foundational distrust is rooted in the historical politicization of electoral administration under the country's prolonged dominant-party system. This historical baggage amplifies the impact of specific operational failures, which align with the regional and global patterns. Studies and election observer reports

consistently pinpoint several trust-eroding factors specific to ZEC. The opaque voters' roll is a primary concern, with systematic failures to provide a clean and publicly accessible roll in a timely manner. Audits by civil society have repeatedly highlighted anomalies including duplicated entries, deceased persons on the roll, and inflated registration figures, creating a perception of pre-election manipulation (Sibanda, 2022). The shroud of secrecy around the printing and procurement of ballot papers fuels allegations of collusion and pre-marking. This lack of transparency in a critical electoral input directly contravenes global best practices.

The non-verifiable results management system is arguably the most critical factor. The absence of an auditable results trail creates a black box at the national tally centre, making it impossible to independently verify the official results and leading to perennial disputes (Mateta, 2022). ZEC's operational culture is often perceived as defensive and dismissive, in stark contrast to inclusive models elsewhere. The lack of genuine, power-sharing dialogue reinforces an “us versus them dynamic.”

2.5 Trust-Building Strategies in African EMBs

Learning from the successes and failures of other African Electoral Management Bodies provides a vital repository of strategies for the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. The experiences of Botswana, Kenya, and Ghana offer contrasting but highly instructive models for building, and in some cases rebuilding, public trust. These cases demonstrate that sustainable trust-building requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses institutional design, operational processes, and political legitimacy.

Botswana's Independent Electoral Commission represents a model of institutionalized competence achieved through consistent, predictable, and professional execution of its mandate

over decades (Marata, 2023). The IEC's credibility stems from a deeply institutionalized political culture of respecting electoral rules, supported by a professional and non-partisan secretariat that manages elections with remarkable efficiency and minimal controversy (Mahammad, 2025). The cumulative power of procedural consistency and neutrality has established the IEC's announcements and processes as generally accepted facts among all major political actors. This has been achieved through scrupulously avoiding actions perceived as partisan and maintaining a transparent, predictable electoral calendar. For electoral commissions facing credibility challenges, the Botswana example emphasizes that trust is built over the long term through relentless commitment to administrative excellence, demonstrating that while a supportive political culture is advantageous, the electoral management body itself can cultivate a reputation for reliability through consistent, impartial actions (Laanela, 2023).

Kenya's experience provides a more dramatic parallel for contexts requiring comprehensive institutional overhaul following catastrophic loss of public trust. The post-2007 election violence necessitated the dissolution of the discredited Electoral Commission of Kenya and the creation of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission under a new constitution with strengthened legal safeguards (Omondi, 2017). Kenya's initial trust-building strategy heavily emphasized technological solutions, introducing an integrated system comprising biometric voter registration, electronic voter identification, and an electronic results transmission system designed to remove human discretion from sensitive electoral processes. However, the 2017 general election revealed the limitations of this techno-legal approach when the failure of the electronic results transmission system, combined with persistent allegations of political infiltration within the IEBC, led the Supreme Court to annul the presidential election (Akello, 2021). The lesson from Kenya is that technology alone cannot build trust and may introduce new

vulnerabilities if the institution managing it lacks broad-based legitimacy. This experience demonstrates that legal and technological reforms must be accompanied by deliberate efforts to build the political legitimacy of commissioners and the institution through inclusive recruitment processes and sustained, genuine engagement with all political stakeholders.

Ghana's Electoral Commission offers another instructive model through its institutionalization of stakeholder dialogue. The establishment of the Inter-Party Advisory Committee created a permanent consultative forum where the electoral commission meets regularly with representatives of all political parties to discuss electoral regulations, the electoral calendar, and contentious issues (Yobo, 2023). This mechanism does not always produce consensus but fosters a crucial sense of inclusion and transparency, allowing parties to voice grievances before they escalate into public disputes. The Ghanaian approach demonstrates that structured, ongoing dialogue can demystify electoral operations and build strategic trust with political actors, even in highly competitive environments (Haruna, 2025). This model proves particularly valuable for building confidence in contexts where historical suspicions between electoral management bodies and political parties exist.

2.6 The Legal and Institutional Framework of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission

The constitutional and legal architecture governing the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission presents a duality of progressive formal provisions and persistent practical constraints (Tsabora, 2022). The 2013 Constitution established ZEC as an independent body under Section 238, creating one of Africa's most legally fortified electoral management structures. The framework incorporates safeguards identified by international best practices, including security of tenure through non-renewable six-year terms for commissioners and financial autonomy designating the commission's budget as a direct charge on the Consolidated Revenue Fund (Githaiga, 2023). These constitutional

provisions create institutional insulation from executive interference and represent an advancement from Zimbabwe's pre-2013 electoral governance framework.

A pronounced gap between de jure protections and de facto operational reality. The appointment process for commissioners remains a critical weakness in the institutional design. The selection mechanism led by the President and the Parliamentary Committee on Standing Rules and Orders demonstrates persistent deficiencies in transparency and inclusivity (Tichaona, 2024). Opposition parties and civil society organizations question the neutrality of appointed commissioners arguing the process exhibits structural biases toward the ruling party creating a legitimacy deficit at the institutional foundation. Moyo (2024) posits that, this perception problem is exacerbated by Zimbabwe's dominant-party system, where informal power dynamics and historical precedents of executive dominance shape institutional behavior.

The operational environment presents constraints undermining constitutional safeguards. Evidence from the 2018 and 2023 electoral cycles demonstrates how informal institutions and political pressures overwhelm formal rules. The persistent legacy of executive dominance creates conditions where electoral officials engage in self-censorship or operate within perceived political constraints rather than exercising their full constitutional mandate (Uitz, 2021). Identifiable gaps in subsidiary legislation, particularly the Electoral Act, create ambiguities that limit transparency. The absence of explicit requirements for real-time public disclosure of results and insufficient penalties for electoral offenses establish systemic vulnerabilities contradicting the spirit of constitutional independence.

2.7 Case Study: Ghana's Electoral Commission

Ghana's Electoral Commission (EC) provides a powerful case study of building trust in a highly competitive and historically volatile electoral environment. Following a period of political instability, Ghana's EC has gained a reputation for credibility. Gyimah-Boadi (2017) attributes this success to two key factors: consistent operational competence and the institutionalization of dialogue. The establishment of the Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) was a masterstroke. IPAC serves as a permanent consultative forum where the EC meets with representatives of all political parties to discuss electoral regulations, the electoral calendar, and contentious issues (Abdullah, 2019). This does not always produce consensus, but it fosters a sense of inclusion and transparency, allowing parties to voice grievances before they escalate into public disputes. The EC has made significant strides in leveraging technology, such as a biometric voter registration system, to enhance the integrity of the voter roll (Ohman, 2019). While challenges remain such as occasional technical glitches and accusations from losing parties the EC's commitment to continuous improvement and open dialogue has made it a benchmark in West Africa (Boafo-Arthur, 2019). The lesson for Zimbabwe is that proactive, structured engagement with stakeholders is not a sign of weakness but a critical strategy for building legitimacy.

Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission

Kenya's journey is one of profound reform born out of catastrophic failure. The 2007/08 post-election violence, which resulted in over 1,000 deaths, was directly linked to a loss of public trust in the then Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK), particularly its opaque and disputed results management process (Lynch, 2018). In response, the 2010 Constitution established a new body, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), with strengthened legal safeguards for independence.

A suite of technological innovations was introduced, including a biometric voter identification system and an electronic results transmission system (Cheeseman, 2019). These reforms were designed to inject objectivity and transparency into the most sensitive phases of the election. The 2013 and 2017 elections, however, demonstrated the limitations of a techno-legal fix. In 2017, the failure of the electronic transmission system and ongoing perceptions of partisan bias within the IEBC led the Supreme Court to annull the presidential election a historic first in Africa (Kadima, 2020). Kenya's experience offers a crucial lesson: technology alone cannot build trust if the institution managing it lacks broad-based political legitimacy. It highlights the need for holistic reform that addresses not just legal and technical systems, but also the perceived neutrality of the human elements within the EMB (Njogu, 2021).

2.8 Determinants of Public Trust in Electoral Management Bodies

There are five fundamental determinants of public trust in Electoral Management Bodies, with these elements functioning as interconnected pillars where weakness in any single dimension inevitably compromises the entire structure of institutional credibility (Laanela, 2023). The interdependence of these factors explains why sustainable trust-building requires comprehensive institutional development rather than isolated reforms, as electoral credibility emerges from the synergistic reinforcement of all determinants across the complete electoral cycle. These determinants operate within a framework where both perceived and actual performance matter equally, creating a dynamic where historical performance, current operations, and future expectations collectively shape public confidence in electoral processes (Brezzi et al., 2021).

Awanda (2024), found that independence constitutes the foundational determinant that underpins all other aspects of electoral credibility, encompassing both legal autonomy (de jure) and operational freedom from governmental and partisan interference (de facto). According to

Hickey and Rivera (2025), constitutional provisions that establish security of tenure for commissioners and guarantee financial autonomy represent necessary but insufficient conditions for genuine independence. The practical manifestation of independence requires demonstrated resistance to political pressure across all electoral operations, from candidate nomination processes to final result certification, as EMBs perceived as subordinate to executive authority or ruling parties inevitably suffer legitimacy deficits regardless of their formal legal status (Nshindano & Mpundu, 2025). López-Pintor (2010) emphasizes that true independence extends beyond statutory provisions to include operational autonomy in decision-making and implementation, particularly in sensitive areas such as voter registration and results management. This understanding of independence helps explain why some EMBs with strong constitutional protections still face credibility challenges, as seen in contexts where informal political pressures undermine formal institutional arrangements (Matadi, 2025). The case of Zimbabwe illustrates this paradox, where constitutional guarantees of independence coexist with persistent questions about operational autonomy, particularly regarding commissioner appointments and critical electoral processes.

Transparency demands comprehensive openness across all electoral processes, including voter registration, ballot procurement, voting procedures, and results transmission, creating verifiable pathways that enable stakeholders to independently confirm electoral integrity (Shuker & Hussain, 2024). Birch and van Ham (2017) demonstrate that secrecy in any of these domains creates fertile ground for distrust and allegations of malpractice, making transparency not merely an administrative preference but a fundamental requirement for credible elections. Effective transparency mechanisms include observable procurement processes, publicly accessible and analyzable voter registers, and real-time results transmission systems that allow political parties, civil society, and international observers to track each phase of the electoral process (Adam, 2024).

The absence of such transparent systems inevitably fuels speculation and undermines public confidence in electoral outcomes, as stakeholders cannot verify declared results against original polling station data. Papadopoulos (2023) further categorizes the strategic limitation of transparency as a form of "legalistic electoral manipulation," where technically legal but deliberately opaque processes create conditions conducive to electoral malfeasance. This is particularly relevant in contexts like Zimbabwe, where controversies surrounding the voters' roll and results management processes exemplify how transparency deficits can undermine an otherwise comprehensive legal framework for elections.

Technical Competence refers to the professional capacity to administer elections efficiently and accurately throughout the electoral cycle, requiring systematic planning, adequate resource allocation, and responsive adaptation to emerging challenges. Alvarez et al. (2018) identify technical competence as encompassing logistical planning, staff training, equipment management, and contingency preparedness, with failures in any of these areas directly eroding public confidence by demonstrating institutional incapacity. The successful implementation of biometric voting technology in Ghana's 2012 elections exemplifies how technical competence can enhance credibility, while Kenya's 2017 technological failures illustrate how technical deficiencies can trigger institutional crises regardless of other positive attributes (Mutie, 2022). Technical competence extends beyond the successful execution of election day operations to include the entire electoral cycle, from voter education and registration through to dispute resolution and post-election evaluation (Mahammad, 2025). An EMB's demonstrated ability to manage complex logistical operations, maintain accurate voter registers, and efficiently tabulate results establishes its professional credibility, creating a reservoir of trust that can withstand isolated challenges. Technical failures whether in voter registration systems, ballot distribution, or results tabulation

provide tangible evidence of institutional weakness that opponents can leverage to question electoral legitimacy, regardless of the actual impact on electoral outcomes.

Impartiality requires the consistent and equitable application of electoral laws and procedures to all political contestants, creating a level playing field where outcomes reflect voter preferences rather than institutional biases. Chernykh (2024) establishes that this principle must manifest in uniform treatment of political parties, equal application of campaign regulations, and neutral resolution of electoral disputes, with perceived favoritism fundamentally undermining institutional legitimacy and transforming electoral management from a neutral administrative function into a contested political arena. The Botswana Independent Electoral Commission's consistent application of rules across political parties illustrates how impartiality reinforces institutional credibility, while Zimbabwe's 2018 elections demonstrated how allegations of discriminatory application of electoral regulations can undermine public trust regardless of technical competence in other areas (Sasa, 20220. Impartiality extends beyond the formal application of rules to include the perception and experience of political contestants throughout the electoral process, from registration through campaigning to results announcement. Sebudubudu and Osei-Hwedie (2016) document how the Botswana IEC's reputation for impartiality has been built through decades of consistent, predictable treatment of all political actors, creating institutional credibility that transcends individual electoral cycles. This contrasts with contexts where EMBs are perceived as applying regulations selectively, creating grievances that undermine acceptance of electoral outcomes and potentially triggering post-election conflicts.

Integrity represents the institutional reputation for honesty and resistance to corruption, constituting the moral dimension of electoral management where even isolated ethical failures generate disproportionate damage to public trust through their symbolic power. Nshindano and

Mpundu (2025) identifies integrity as encompassing financial probity in procurement processes, ethical conduct among electoral officials, and demonstrable commitment to electoral justice, with failures in any of these areas providing powerful narratives that opponents can use to challenge institutional legitimacy. The Malawi Electoral Commission's handling of the 2019 election procurement processes demonstrates how financial integrity directly affects institutional legitimacy, while isolated incidents of misconduct in other contexts have shown how ethical lapses can undermine decades of institutional credibility building (Nkhata & Chipofya, 2024). Integrity functions as the moral foundation that supports all other determinants, as stakeholders are unlikely to trust an institution's independence, transparency, technical competence, or impartiality if they question its fundamental honesty. Dulani and Chunga (2020) document how integrity failures in procurement and financial management can create perceptions of institutional corruption that extend far beyond the specific incidents involved, creating a generalized distrust that affects all aspects of electoral administration. This underscores why integrity must be understood not merely as the absence of corruption but as the active cultivation of ethical institutional culture manifested in both individual conduct and organizational processes.

2.9 The Zimbabwean Context

The body of literature on ZEC paints a consistent picture of an institution grappling with a severe and protracted legitimacy deficit. Scholars like Masunungure (2018) and Bratton (2014) locate the origins of this distrust in the historical politicization of electoral administration under Zimbabwe’s prolonged dominant-party system. Recent empirical studies reinforce this. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN, 2023) reports consistently highlight issues such as: problematic voter registration exercises; a disputed and inaccessible voters’ roll; opaque procurement processes for ballot papers; and a results management process that lacks verifiability.

Ndlovu (2022) directly links these operational shortcomings to the recurring electoral disputes that have characterized Zimbabwe's politics since 2000. Afrobarometer survey data (2022) quantifies this crisis, showing that trust in ZEC (38%) lags significantly behind trust in traditional leaders and the military. This suggests a failure to transition from a liberation-era legitimacy based on authority to a democratic legitimacy based on transparency and accountability (Tendi, 2020). While this literature provides a robust diagnosis of the problem, it often stops short of offering a comprehensive, strategy-oriented prescription informed by comparative best practices.

2.10 Identified Gaps

This review identifies three critical gaps that this study seeks to address. Existing studies on ZEC are predominantly diagnostic, excellently detailing the symptoms and causes of distrust but offering limited systematic, evidence-based strategies for remediation. There is a scarcity of research that systematically integrates lessons from other African EMBs that have undergone successful (or unsuccessful) trust-building reforms, such as Ghana and Kenya, into the Zimbabwean context. Few studies explicitly leverage the insights from Institutional and Social Trust theories to develop a coherent framework for understanding ZEC's challenges and designing targeted interventions. This study will bridge these gaps by developing a contextually nuanced, theoretically informed, and comparative-based set of actionable strategies for ZEC.

2.11 Summary

This chapter has constructed a comprehensive theoretical and empirical foundation for the study. By integrating Institutional Theory and Social Trust Theory, it provides a robust framework for analysing the multi-faceted nature of trust in EMBs. The global and regional review established that independence, transparency, and competence are universal prerequisites for legitimacy. The case studies of Ghana and Kenya offer contrasting but informative models of reform: Ghana

through sustained dialogue and incrementalism, and Kenya through dramatic legal and technological overhaul following a crisis. The analysis of the Zimbabwean context confirms a deep-seated trust deficit rooted in historical and operational factors. The identified gaps highlight the need for this study's focused contribution: moving from diagnosis to prescription by leveraging comparative lessons and theoretical insights to propose viable strategies for rebuilding public trust in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlined the detailed research plan and procedures that were employed to conduct the study. It describes the philosophical paradigm, research design, data collection methods, sampling techniques, and data analysis strategies that were used to answer the research questions and achieve the stated objectives. The chosen mixed-methods approach is designed to provide both quantitative breadth and qualitative depth, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the problem.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The study adopted a pragmatist research philosophy. Pragmatism, associated with John Dewey, is concerned with solving practical problems and values both objective and subjective knowledge (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). It is problem-centred and emphasizes practical consequences, prioritizing the choice of methods that best address the research problem. This philosophy is ideal for this study as it supports the use of a mixed-methods approach to derive practical, evidence-based strategies for the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).

3.3 Research Approach

3.3.1 Research Approach

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This approach is defined by Creswell and Plano (2017) as a research design whereby the researcher collects, analyses, and integrates both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to provide a more complete understanding of a research problem than either

approach alone. This facilitates triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of findings by providing convergent evidence on the determinants of trust in ZEC.

3.3.2 Research Design

Research design refers to the overall strategy that guides the process of conducting research, providing a blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data (Babbie, 2020). For this study, a convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used. In this design, the quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently during one phase of the research, analysed separately, and then the results are merged or integrated during the interpretation phase to draw comprehensive conclusions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

The design is both descriptive and exploratory. It is descriptive because it sought to accurately describe the levels and determinants of public trust in ZEC through quantitative data. It is exploratory as it uses qualitative data to investigate the underlying reasons for distrust and to explore potential solutions and strategies, which are complex issues requiring in-depth insight (Creswell, 2014).

3.4 Research Design

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3.4 Population

The target population comprises several key stakeholder groups like eligible voters in Zimbabwe, officials from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), representatives from major

political parties (e.g., ZANU-PF, CCC and MDC), representatives from civil society organizations involved in election observation (e.g., Zimbabwe Election Support Network – ZESN), political analysts, SADC, European Union and academics specializing in governance.

3.5 Sampling

A multi-stage sampling strategy was employed:

3.5.1 Stratified Random Sampling

For the voter survey, the country was stratified by province (e.g., Harare Urban, Mashonaland Central Rural). Within each stratum, a random sample of eligible voters will be selected from community lists or via a random walk method to ensure geographic representation.

3.5.2 Purposive Sampling

For the qualitative component, key informants were deliberately selected based on their expertise and role. This includes senior ZEC officials, heads of political party electoral directorates, executive directors of election-focused CSOs, and political analysts

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Primary data was collected through two main instruments. Structured Surveys which wre closed-ended questionnaire was administered to the selected voters. It collects quantitative data on demographics, trust levels (using a Likert scale), perceptions of ZEC's independence and transparency, and awareness of its processes. This will provide data to address Objectives 1 and 2. Semi-Structured Interviews which are interview guides with open-ended questions will be used to conduct in-depth interviews with the purposively selected key informants. This will yield qualitative data on the deeper causes of distrust, evaluations of the legal framework, and insights into viable trust-building strategies. Secondary data will be collected through document analysis

of ZEC reports, election observer reports (e.g., SADC, AU, ZESN), legal statutes (the Constitution, Electoral Act), and Afrobarometer survey data to provide context and support triangulation.

3.7 Data Analysis

Survey data will be cleaned, coded, and entered into Excel Statistics software. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) will describe trust levels and perceptions. Interviews will be transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis will be employed, involving familiarization, coding, theme identification, reviewing, and interpretation. Emerging themes will be interpreted in relation to the research objectives and theoretical framework. Results from both quantitative and qualitative analyses will be integrated during discussion to provide a holistic answer to the research questions.

3.8 Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Validity was ensured through triangulation (multiple sources and methods), careful instrument design, and pilot testing. For reliability on the survey, internal consistency will be measured using Cronbach's alpha. Documentation of all procedures allows for replication. Trustworthiness Ensured through member checking, thick description, and audit trails documenting the analysis process.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The study will adhere to high ethical standards. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any point without penalty. Ethical clearance was sought from the Bindura University of Science Education Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

3.10 Summary

This chapter outlined the research methodology and design for the study. It described the pragmatist research philosophy, the mixed-methods approach, and the descriptive and exploratory design. The chapter detailed the target population, sampling strategies and data collection methods, including surveys, interviews, and secondary document analysis. It also explained data analysis techniques for both quantitative and qualitative data and addressed validity, reliability, and ethical considerations. Overall, the chapter provides a clear roadmap for conducting the study and generating reliable insights on strategies to build public trust in ZEC.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents, analyses, and interprets the data collected from the field on strategies that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission can employ to build public trust in Zimbabwe. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing structured survey administered to 50 respondents and semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants. The key informants included officials from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), representatives from political parties (ZANU-PF and CCC), civil society organisations (ZESN), academics, and election observers. The presentation follows a systematic approach, beginning with demographic characteristics of respondents, followed by data analysis organised according to the research objectives. Quantitative data is presented using tables, frequencies, and percentages, while qualitative data is presented through thematic analysis with verbatim extracts from participants, coded as P1 to P15 for key informants.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

This section presents the demographic profile of the respondents who participated in the study. A total of 50 respondents completed the structured survey questionnaire. However, it is important to note that the initial target sample for the survey was 60 respondents. Ten potential respondents declined to participate, citing reasons such as political sensitivity of the topic (n=4), lack of interest in electoral matters (n=3), and time constraints (n=3). For the qualitative component, 15 key informants were targeted, and all 15 agreed to participate, representing a 100% response rate for interviews. This high response rate among key informants was attributed to their professional interest in electoral governance and the assurance of confidentiality. Understanding

the demographic characteristics of the 50 survey respondents is essential for contextualizing their perceptions of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission.

Figure 4.2.1: Distribution of Respondents by Sex

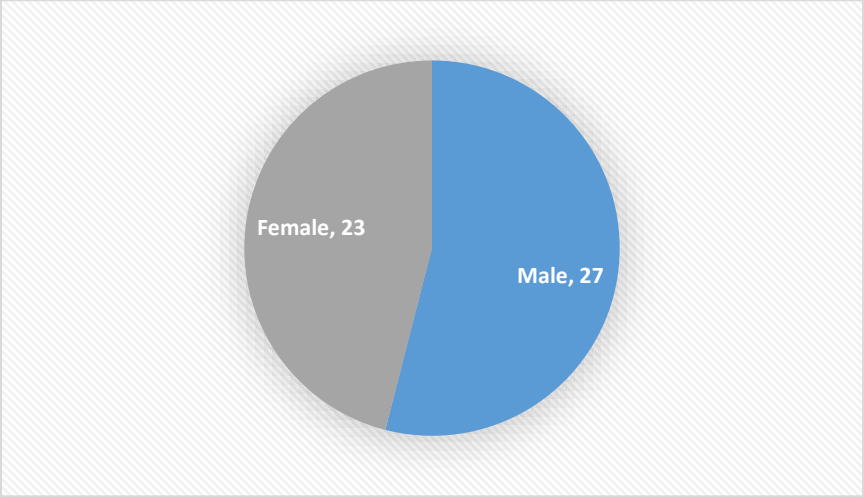


Fig 4.2.1 Sex

27 (54%) of the respondents were male while 23 (46% were female. This distribution indicates a relatively balanced representation of both genders, which is important for capturing diverse perspectives on electoral trust. As noted by Barnes and Burchard (2022), gender can influence perceptions of institutional credibility and electoral participation. The inclusion of both male and female voices ensures that the study captures any gendered dimensions of trust in ZEC.

Figure 4.2.2 Distribution of respondents by Age

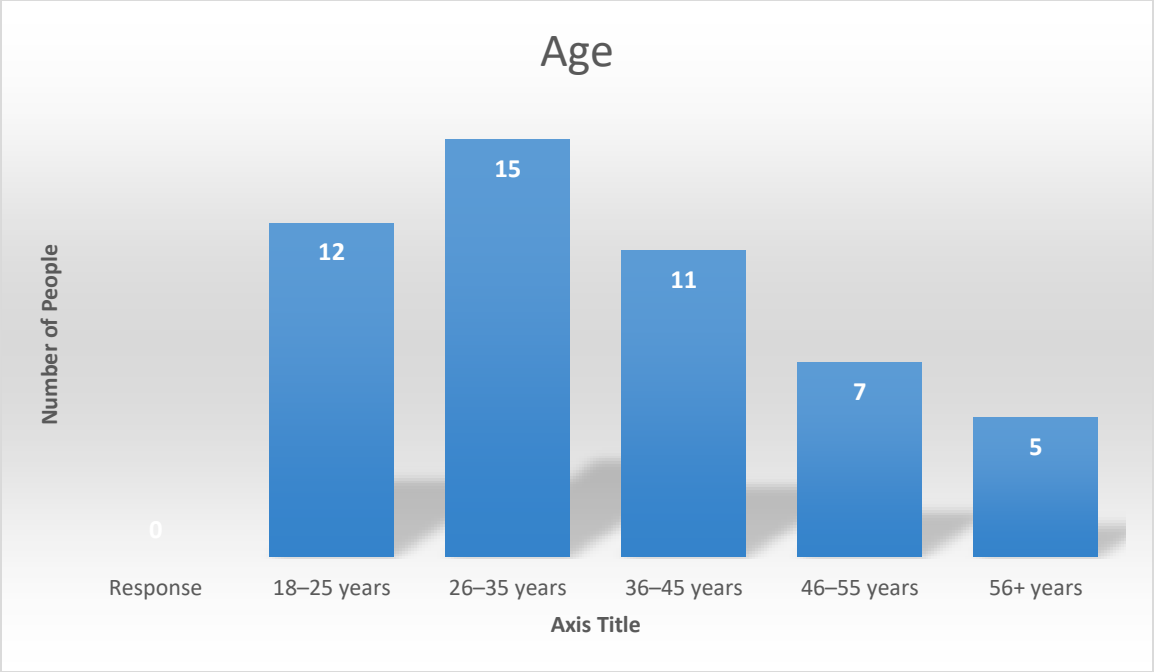


Figure 4.2.2 Age

The age distribution in Fig 4.2.2 reveals that the majority of respondents (54%) were within the 18–35 years age bracket representing the youth demographic. This is significant because young people constitute a substantial portion of the Zimbabwean electorate and have been at the forefront of electoral activism and demands for reform (Masunungure & Bratton, 2021). The 26–35 years category had the highest representation at 30%, followed by the 18–25 years category at 24%. This distribution ensures adequate representation of younger voters, whose perceptions are crucial for long-term democratic consolidation (Ndlovu, 2022).

Table 4.2.3 Distribution of Respondents by Level of Education

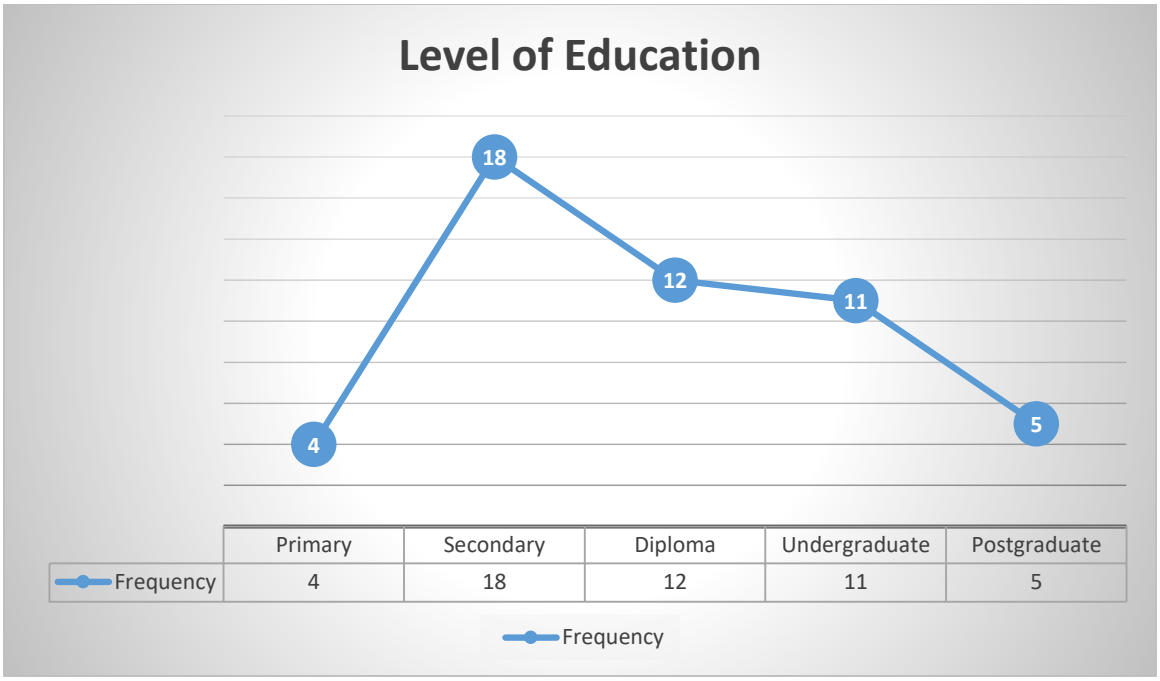


Table 4.2.3: level of Education

Table 4.3 indicates that 18 (36%) of respondents had attained secondary education, followed by diploma holders (24%) and undergraduate degree holders (22%). The relatively high proportion of tertiary-educated respondents (56% combining diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate) suggests that the sample could provide informed insights into electoral governance issues, as education level correlates with political awareness and critical evaluation of institutional performance (Norris, 2014). Respondents with primary education constituted 8%, ensuring representation of less-educated voters whose perspectives are equally important in understanding trust dynamics.

4.3 Assessing the Prevailing Levels and Determinants of Public Trust in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission

The first objective of this study sought to assess the prevailing levels and determinants of public trust in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. To achieve this, respondents were asked a

series of questions regarding their trust in ZEC's ability to manage elections fairly, the accuracy of its results, and whether the Commission acts in the interest of all citizens. The findings are presented below. To assess the prevailing level of public trust in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the statement: “I trust ZEC to manage elections fairly and accurately.” Table 4.3.1 presents the distribution of responses.

“I trust ZEC to manage elections fairly and accurately	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
	18	14	7	8	3

Table 4.3.1: Trust in ZEC's Ability to Manage Elections Fairly

Table 4.3.1 reveals that a combined 64% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they trust ZEC to manage elections fairly. Specifically, 36% strongly disagreed, while 28% disagreed. Only 22% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, with 14% remaining neutral. This finding indicates a significant trust deficit in ZEC's capacity to conduct fair elections, confirming the problem statement articulated in Chapter One, which highlighted that only 38% of Zimbabweans trusted ZEC according to Afrobarometer (2022) data.

The current finding shows an even lower trust level, suggesting that confidence in the Commission may have further declined following the 2023 harmonised elections.

The qualitative data from key informants provided deeper insights into the reasons for this distrust. One political party representative explained:

> *"The issue is not just about the elections themselves; it is about the entire process from registration to results announcement. When we see problems with the voters' roll, when we hear about ballot papers being printed without opposition oversight, how can we trust that the election will be fair? ZEC has not done enough to convince us that they are neutral."* (P7)

Another informant from civil society added:

> *"Trust is built through consistent behaviour over time. ZEC has a history of controversial elections dating back to 2000. Each election cycle, we see the same problems lack of transparency, perceived bias, and disputed results. This creates a cumulative effect where citizens no longer give the Commission the benefit of the doubt."* (P4, CSO Representative)

These qualitative findings align with Institutional Theory as articulated by North (1990), which posits that institutional legitimacy derives from perceived adherence to rules, consistency, and impartiality. The data suggests that ZEC has failed to demonstrate these qualities consistently, resulting in low public trust. The findings also resonate with Hardin's (2002) concept of trust as "encapsulated interest," where citizens will only trust an institution if they believe its interests are aligned with their own. The perception that ZEC's interests may be aligned with the ruling party

rather than the public good was evident in the responses. To assess trust in the accuracy of election results, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement:

"I trust ZEC's results because they are accurate." Figure 4.3.2 presents the findings.

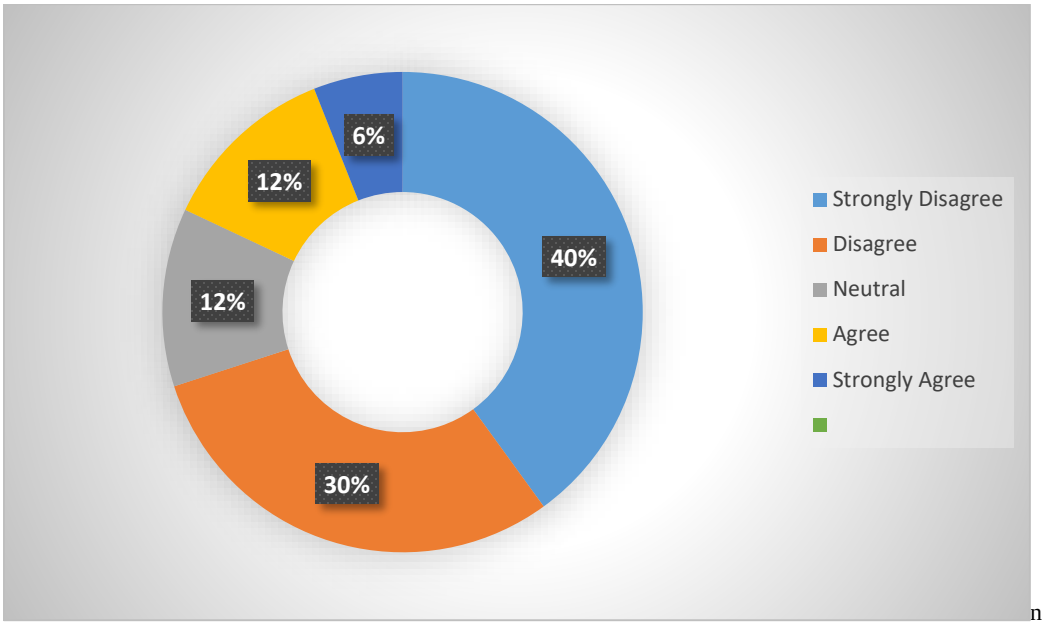


Fig 4.3.2: Trust in ZEC's Results Because They Are Accurate

Table 4.3.2 shows that 70% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they trust ZEC's results because they are accurate. Only 18% agreed or strongly agreed, while 12% were neutral. This finding is particularly concerning because confidence in election results is fundamental to accepting electoral outcomes and maintaining political stability. The high level of scepticism regarding result accuracy supports the assertion by Mateta (2022) that the non-verifiable results management system is a critical factor eroding trust.

A key informant from the academic community elaborated:

"The black box at the national tally centre is a major problem. When results are transmitted from polling stations to the centre, there is no way for stakeholders to verify

what happens to those results. In many other countries, you can see results streaming in real-time on a public portal. Here, we wait for days, and then suddenly results are announced. This opacity breeds suspicion and rumours." (P11, Academic)

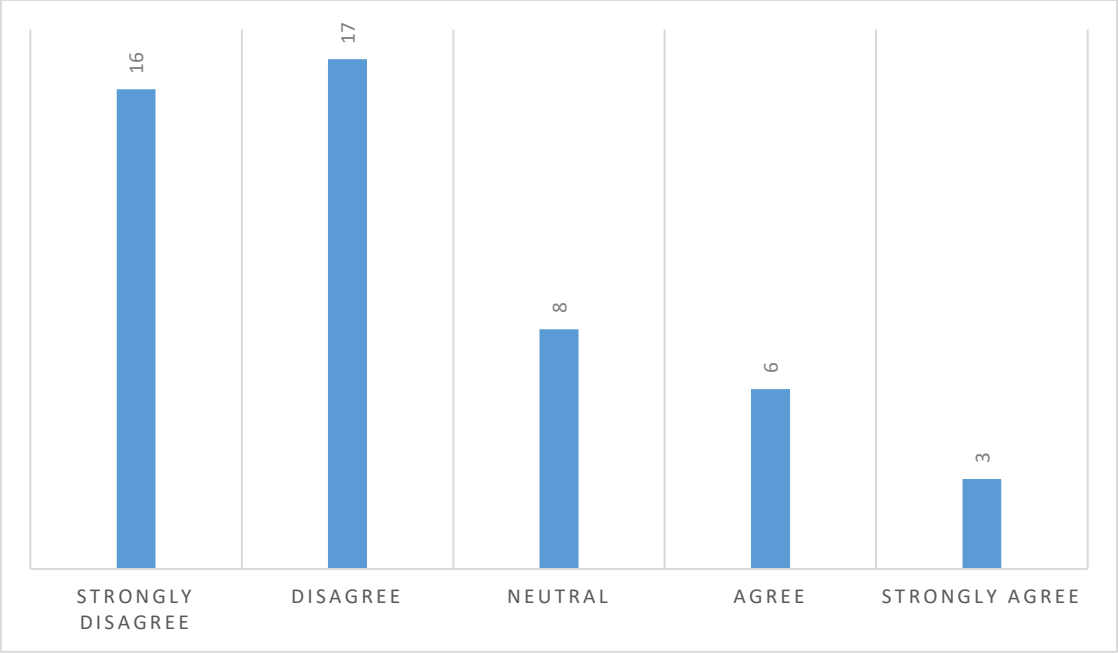
Another informant, a former election observer, stated:

"I have observed elections in several African countries, and the level of secrecy surrounding ZEC's results management is unusual. In Kenya, despite their problems, they have a results transmission system that allows observers to track results. In Ghana, party agents can verify results at every level. Here, there is simply no accountability in the results process." (P14, Election Observer)

These findings contrast with the successful practices observed in Ghana, where the Electoral Commission's commitment to transparency and stakeholder engagement has built confidence in results (Gyimah-Boadi, 2017). The data suggests that ZEC's current approach to results management fundamentally undermines trust, regardless of the actual accuracy of the results. This aligns with Birch and van Ham's (2017) assertion that secrecy in electoral processes creates fertile ground for distrust and allegations of malpractice.

Table 4.3.3: Distribution of Respondents by the view that ZEC acts in the interests of all citizens

To assess whether respondents perceive ZEC as serving the broader public good rather than partisan interests, they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement: “ZEC acts in the interests of all citizens.” Table 4.3.3 presents the distribution of responses.



The data in Fig 4.3.3 presents that 66% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that ZEC acts in the interest of all citizens. Only 18% agreed or strongly agreed, with 16% neutral. This finding reveals a perception that ZEC serves partisan interests rather than the broader public good, which is a fundamental legitimacy challenge for any electoral management body.

A ZEC official who was interviewed offered a different perspective:

> *"We operate within the legal framework provided by the Constitution and the Electoral Act. The perception that we are biased is often based on misunderstanding of our mandate and procedures. We treat all political parties equally under the law, but when the law itself is contested, we become the target of criticism."* (P2, ZEC Official)

However, this view was contested by a political party representative:

> *"When we raise concerns about the voters' roll, we are ignored. When we request to observe ballot printing, we are denied. When we challenge irregularities, our*

complaints are dismissed. This is not equal treatment. If ZEC truly acted in all citizens' interests, they would be more transparent and responsive to concerns from all stakeholders." (P8, Political Party Representative)

These contrasting perspectives illustrate the gap between ZEC's self-perception and public perception, a phenomenon that Levitsky and Murillo (2009) describe as the decoupling between formal institutional mandates and actual functioning. The findings suggest that while ZEC may believe it is acting impartially, its practices and communication strategies fail to convey this impartiality to stakeholders. This aligns with Social Trust Theory's emphasis on the importance of perception and experience in building trust (Uslaner, 2002).

4.4 Identifying and Evaluating Specific Operational Factors Contributing to the Erosion of Trust in ZEC's Operations and Integrity

The second objective sought to identify and evaluate the specific operational factors that contribute to the erosion of trust in ZEC's operations and integrity. Respondents were asked about their perceptions of ZEC's independence, treatment of political parties, and resistance to political pressure.

Table 4.4.1: Distribution of respondents by the view that ZEC Commissioners are Free from Political Influence

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	19	38%
Disagree	16	32%

Neutral	7	14%
Agree	5	10%
Strongly Agree	3	6%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Table 4.4.1 shows that 70% of respondents (38% Strongly Disagree + 32% Disagree) disagreed or strongly disagreed that ZEC commissioners are free from political influence. 16% agreed or strongly agreed (10% Agree + 6% Strongly Agree), while 14% were neutral.This finding indicates widespread scepticism about the independence of the Commission's leadership, which is concerning given that independence is foundational to electoral credibility (Nshindano & Mpundu, 2025).

A key informant from civil society explained:

> *"The appointment process for commissioners is the root of the problem. When commissioners are appointed by the President without meaningful parliamentary scrutiny and civil society participation, they are inevitably perceived as presidential appointees rather than independent election managers. This perception persists regardless of their individual integrity."* (P5, CSO Representative)

An academic informant added:

> *"Even if individual commissioners are personally independent, the process of their appointment creates a legitimacy deficit. In countries like South Africa, the*

Electoral Commission appointments involve public interviews and broader stakeholder participation. Here, it is a closed process that produces commissioners who are not seen as truly independent." (P12, Academic)

These findings support Tichaona's (2024) observation that the selection mechanism for ZEC commissioners demonstrates persistent deficiencies in transparency and inclusivity. The data suggests that the perception of political influence is not merely about commissioner behaviour but is embedded in the institutional design itself. This aligns with Institutional Theory's emphasis on the importance of formal rules and processes in shaping institutional legitimacy (Hall & Taylor, 1996).

Table 4.4.2: ZEC Treats All Political Parties Equally

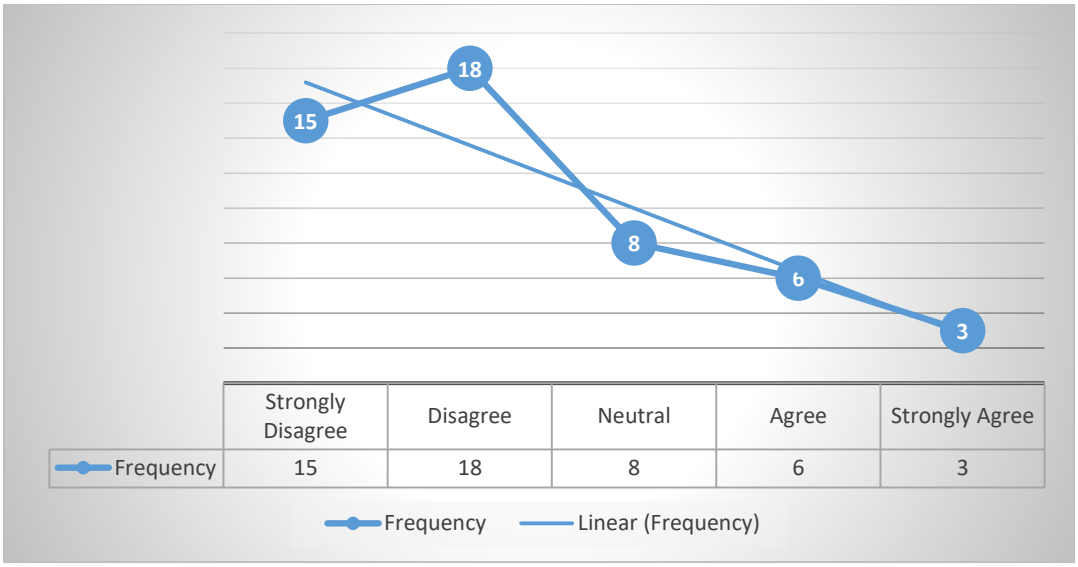


Table 4.4.2 reveals that 66% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that ZEC treats all political parties equally. Only 18% agreed or strongly agreed, with 16% neutral. This finding suggests that perceived partisan bias in the application of electoral regulations is a significant factor eroding trust.

A political party representative provided specific examples:

> *"During the 2023 elections, our party was denied permits for rallies while ruling party rallies proceeded without issue. When we complained, ZEC said it was a police matter. But they have a coordinating role in election security. They could have intervened but chose not to. This is not equal treatment."* (P9, Political Party Representative)

Another informant from a different party stated:

> *"The bias is subtle but real. Access to state media during campaigns, the timing of voter registration updates, the location of polling stations in all these areas, we see patterns that favour the incumbent. Whether this is deliberate or just the result of institutional capture, the effect is the same: we don't trust the process."* (P10, Political Party Representative)

A ZEC official responded to these allegations:

> *"We apply the same rules to all parties. The challenges that parties face often stem from their own organisational capacity rather than ZEC bias. A party with fewer resources and less experience will naturally face more difficulties in complying with electoral requirements. That is not our fault."* (P3, ZEC Official)

These contrasting perspectives illustrate the complexity of perceived impartiality. While ZEC may apply rules uniformly on paper, the differential capacity of parties to engage with those rules creates de facto inequality. This finding aligns with Chernykh's (2024) observation that impartiality requires not just uniform application of rules but also proactive efforts to level the

playing field. The data suggests that ZEC's passive approach to impartiality is insufficient to build trust in a context of significant resource disparities between parties.

Table 4.4.3: ZEC Resists External Political Pressure

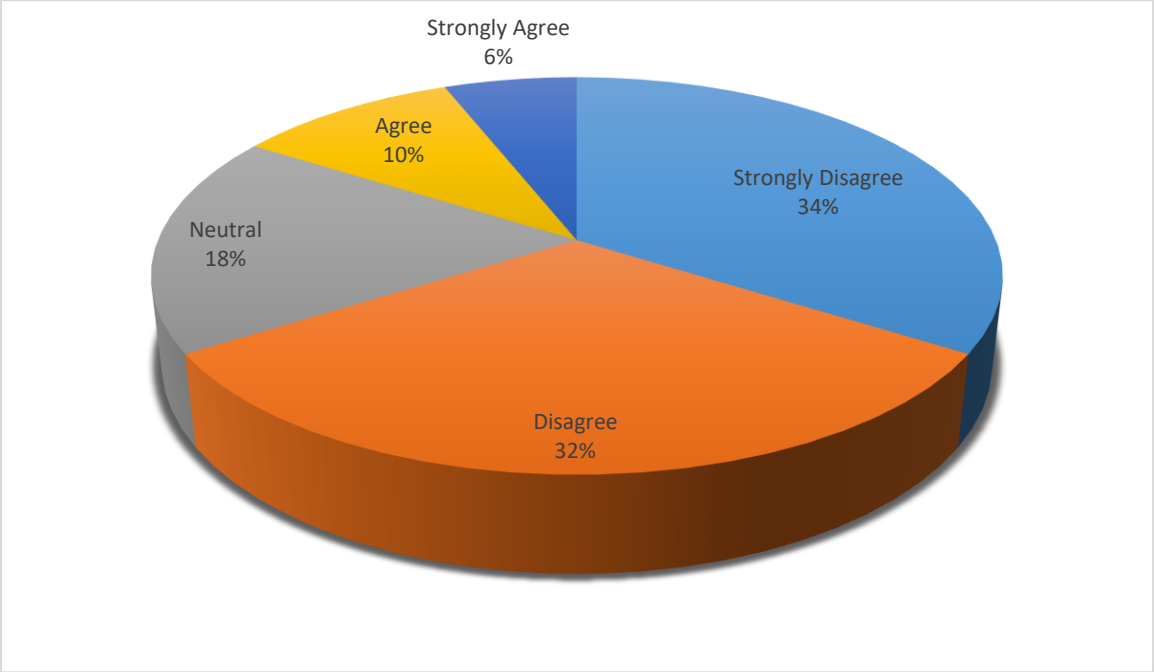


Table 4.4.3 indicates that 66% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that ZEC resists external political pressure. Only 16% agreed or strongly agreed, with 18% neutral. This finding suggests that ZEC is perceived as susceptible to political interference, which fundamentally undermines its credibility as an independent electoral management body.

A civil society informant elaborated:

> *"We have seen numerous instances where ZEC appears to bow to political pressure. The most obvious is the timing of by-elections, which often seems calculated to advantage the ruling party. There have also been cases where ZEC reversed decisions*

> *after intervention from the executive. These incidents are widely reported and contribute to the perception that ZEC is not truly independent."* (P6, CSO Representative)

An academic observer noted:

> *"The structural position of ZEC within Zimbabwe's governance architecture creates vulnerability to pressure. Although the Constitution provides for financial autonomy, in practice ZEC must negotiate with the Ministry of Finance for resources. This creates dependency and opportunities for pressure. Similarly, the security of tenure for commissioners, while formally protected, can be undermined through informal means."* (P13, Academic)

These findings resonate with Uitz's (2021) observation that informal institutions and political pressures can overwhelm formal constitutional safeguards. The data suggests that despite constitutional provisions for ZEC's independence, the operational reality is one of vulnerability to political influence. This gap between de jure protections and de facto independence is a critical factor eroding trust, as it creates a perception that the Commission's decisions are politically determined rather than professionally guided.

The qualitative data also revealed other operational factors contributing to distrust. One informant highlighted the issue of the voters' roll:

> *"The voters' roll is the foundation of any election. If the roll is not credible, nothing else matters. Yet year after year, we see problems with the roll—duplications, deceased persons, people registered in wrong constituencies. ZEC's failure to deliver a clean voters' roll is perhaps the single biggest factor undermining trust."* (P4, CSO Representative)

Another informant pointed to procurement opacity:

> *"Why is the printing of ballot papers shrouded in such secrecy? In many countries, political parties observe the printing process. Here, it is done in secret, often outside the country, with no oversight. This creates fertile ground for allegations of ballot stuffing and pre-marking. Even if the ballots are perfectly legitimate, the secrecy itself breeds distrust."* (P7, Political Party Representative)

These operational factors problematic voters' roll, opaque procurement, non-verifiable results management, and perceived susceptibility to political pressure collectively create a toxic environment for trust. As Laanela (2023) notes, trust in electoral institutions is built through consistent demonstration of independence, transparency, and competence across all operational domains. The findings suggest that ZEC has failed to meet these standards in multiple areas, resulting in the severe trust deficit documented in this study.

4.5 Examining Comparative Trust-Building Strategies Employed by Electoral Management Bodies in Other African Nations

The third objective sought to examine comparative trust-building strategies employed by electoral management bodies in other African nations, such as Ghana and Kenya, to identify lessons for Zimbabwe. Respondents were asked about their awareness of comparative practices and their views on strategies that could be adapted to the Zimbabwean context.

Table 4.5.1: Distribution of respondents based on their awareness of Electoral Reforms in Other African Countries

Response	Frequency

Very Aware	8
Somewhat Aware	22
Not Aware	20
Total	**50**

Table 4.11 shows that 60% of respondents were either very aware or somewhat aware of electoral reforms in other African countries, while 40% were not aware. This indicates a reasonable level of awareness among the sample, though there is scope for greater public education on comparative practices.

The qualitative data provided rich insights into the lessons that Zimbabwe can learn from other African countries. One informant with knowledge of Ghana's system explained:

> *"Ghana's Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) is a model worth studying. It is a permanent forum where the Electoral Commission meets regularly with all political parties to discuss electoral matters. This doesn't solve every problem, but it creates transparency and allows grievances to be addressed before they become crises. ZEC could benefit from a similar structured engagement mechanism."* (P11, Academic)

Another informant highlighted Kenya's experience:

> *"Kenya's journey shows both the potential and limitations of technology in building trust. The introduction of biometric voter registration and electronic results transmission was meant to enhance credibility, but when the technology failed in 2017, it actually worsened the crisis. The lesson is that technology must be reliable and must*

> *be accompanied by broader institutional reforms. You cannot technology your way out of a legitimacy deficit."* (P14, Election Observer)

A civil society representative added:

> *"Botswana's IEC demonstrates the power of consistency and professionalism over time. They haven't needed dramatic reforms because they have built a reputation for competence and neutrality through decades of reliable performance. For ZEC, this suggests that trust-building is a long-term project requiring sustained commitment to excellence, not just quick fixes before elections."* (P4, CSO Representative)

These comparative insights align with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The Ghanaian IPAC model, as described by Yobo (2023) and Haruna (2025), demonstrates the value of institutionalised dialogue in building trust with political stakeholders. The Kenyan experience, documented by Akello (2021) and Mutie (2022), highlights the importance of holistic reform that addresses both technological and human dimensions of electoral management. The Botswana example, discussed by Marata (2023) and Mahammad (2025), illustrates how cumulative professional consistency can build institutional credibility over the long term.

A political party representative reflected on the applicability of these lessons to Zimbabwe:

> *"The Ghanaian model of stakeholder dialogue is particularly relevant for us. In Zimbabwe, the relationship between ZEC and political parties is often adversarial. We only meet during crises. If there was a permanent forum for ongoing engagement, it could build trust gradually and prevent many disputes from escalating."* (P8, Political Party Representative)

A ZEC official acknowledged the value of comparative learning:

> *"We do study practices in other countries. The challenge is adapting them to our context. What works in Ghana may not work here because our political environment is different. We have to find Zimbabwean solutions to Zimbabwean problems, while learning from others' experiences."* (P2, ZEC Official)

This perspective highlights an important nuance: while comparative lessons are valuable, they must be adapted to local contexts. As Jimale (2025) notes, successful institutional reforms are those that are contextually grounded and responsive to local political dynamics.

4.6 Analysis of Data Relating to Objective Four: Analysing the Legal and Institutional Framework Governing ZEC

The fourth objective sought to analyse the legal and institutional framework governing ZEC to identify enablers and constraints on its independence and transparency. Respondents were asked about their perceptions of the constitutional framework and the Electoral Act.

Table 4.5.2: Distribution of respondents based on their views of whether the Constitution Guarantees ZEC Independence

Response	Frequency
Strongly Disagree	10
Disagree	12
Neutral	14

Agree	9
Strongly Agree	5
Total	**50**

Table 4.12 shows a more mixed response on this question compared to others. While 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Constitution guarantees ZEC independence, 28% agreed or strongly agreed, and 28% were neutral. This suggests that respondents have varying interpretations of the constitutional framework, with some recognising its formal provisions for independence and others focusing on implementation gaps.

A legal expert interviewed for the study explained:

Section 238 of the Constitution establishes ZEC as an independent commission. The provisions for security of tenure non-renewable six-year terms and financial autonomy through a direct charge on the Consolidated Revenue Fund are strong on paper. The problem is not the Constitution itself but the gap between constitutional provisions and political practice." (P15, Legal Academic)

A civil society representative added:

> *"The Constitution provides a good foundation, but it is undermined by the Electoral Act and by informal practices. For example, while the Constitution provides for financial autonomy, in practice ZEC's budget is controlled by the Ministry of Finance. While commissioners have security of tenure, they can be pressured in other ways. The law is necessary but not sufficient."* (P5, CSO Representative)

These findings support Tsabora's (2022) observation that the constitutional architecture governing ZEC presents a duality of progressive formal provisions and persistent practical constraints. The data suggests that strengthening the legal framework alone will not solve the trust deficit; what matters is how the framework is implemented in practice.

Table 4.5.3: The Electoral Act Contains Gaps Affecting Transparency

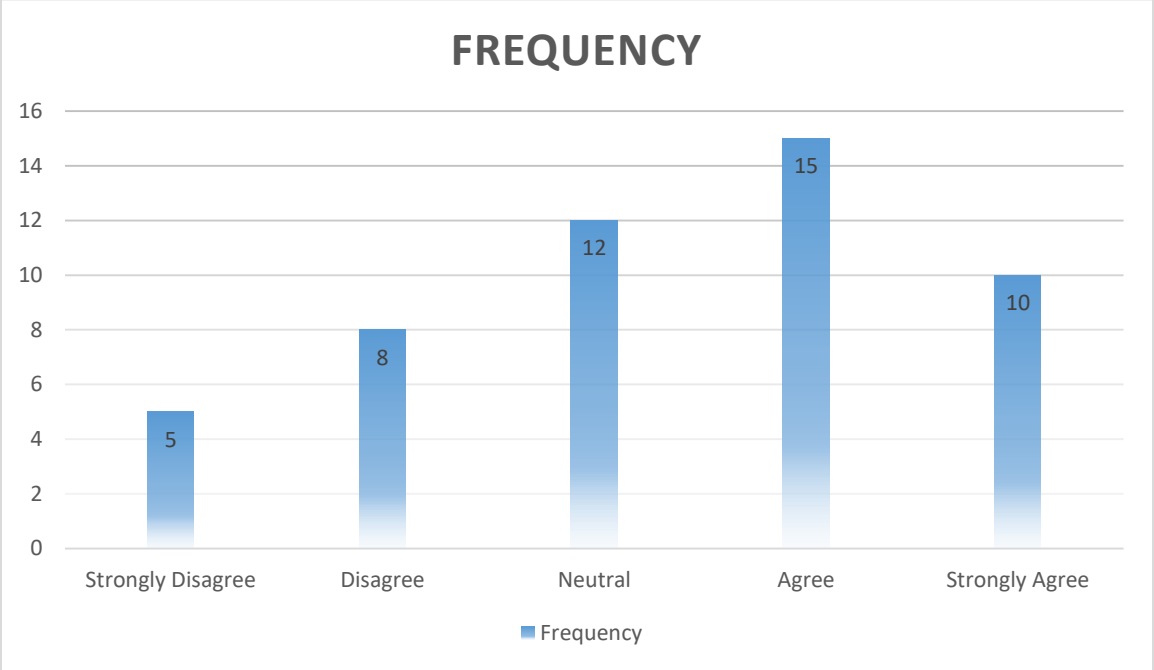


Table 4.5.3 indicates that 50% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Electoral Act contains gaps affecting transparency, while 26% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 24% were neutral. This suggests that a significant proportion of respondents perceive weaknesses in the subsidiary legislation governing elections.

A political party representative elaborated:

"The Electoral Act does not require real-time public disclosure of results. It does not mandate opposition oversight of ballot printing. It does not provide adequate

penalties for electoral offences. These gaps create opportunities for opacity and make it difficult to hold ZEC accountable." (P9, Political Party Representative)

An academic informant noted:

"The Electoral Act could be strengthened in several areas: provisions for accreditation of observers, regulations for campaign finance transparency and requirements for stakeholder consultation on key decisions. Addressing these gaps would not automatically build trust, but it would remove some of the structural barriers to transparency." (P12, Academic)

These findings align with Papadopoulos's (2023) concept of "legalistic electoral manipulation," where technically legal but deliberately opaque processes create conditions conducive to distrust. The data suggests that reforming the Electoral Act to close transparency gaps is an important step in building trust, though it must be accompanied by cultural and institutional changes within ZEC.

4.7 Proposing Evidence-Based Strategies for ZEC to Improve Credibility and Public Trust

The fifth objective sought to propose evidence-based, practical strategies for ZEC to improve its credibility and public trust. Based on the data presented above, several strategic recommendations emerge from the findings.

Table 4.7.1: Willingness to Trust ZEC If Transparency Reforms Are Implemented

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	4	8%
Disagree	6	12%

Neutral	10	20%
Agree	18	36%
Strongly Agree	12	24%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Table 4.7.1 shows that 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would be willing to trust ZEC if transparency reforms were implemented. Only 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed, with 20% neutral. This finding is encouraging, as it suggests that the trust deficit is not immutable and that meaningful reforms could rebuild confidence.

The qualitative data provided specific strategic recommendations from key informants. One informant proposed:

> *"The first and most urgent reform is to make the results management process transparent and verifiable. ZEC should implement a system where results from polling stations are scanned and uploaded to a public portal in real-time, allowing anyone to verify the results against the official tally. This would eliminate the black box at the national centre."* (P14, Election Observer)

Another informant recommended stakeholder engagement reforms:

> *"ZEC should establish a permanent consultative forum modelled on Ghana's IPAC. This forum should meet regularly, not just before elections, and should have genuine power to influence decisions. It should include all political parties, civil society, and traditional leaders. This would build trust through ongoing dialogue and transparency."* (P4, CSO Representative)

A third informant focused on institutional culture:

> *"ZEC needs to change its institutional culture from defensive and secretive to open and responsive. This means training staff in customer service, proactively communicating with stakeholders, and admitting mistakes when they occur. An institution that admits errors is more trustworthy than one that denies everything."* (P11, Academic)

A ZEC official offered a perspective on feasibility:

> *"Many of these recommendations are valid, but they require resources and political will. Implementing a real-time results transmission system costs money. Changing institutional culture takes time. And some reforms require legislative changes that are beyond ZEC's control. We need a phased approach that prioritises the most impactful reforms."* (P2, ZEC Official)

These strategic recommendations align with the findings from the comparative case studies discussed earlier. The emphasis on transparency in results management resonates with Kenya's experience with electronic transmission systems (Miyandazi & Tho, 2025). The call for structured stakeholder engagement echoes Ghana's IPAC model (Yobo, 2023). The focus on institutional culture reflects Botswana's success in building professional credibility over time (Sebudubudu & Osei-Hwedie, 2016).

4.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented, analysed, and interpreted data collected from 50 survey respondents and 15 key informants on strategies for building public trust in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. The findings revealed a severe trust deficit, with the majority of respondents expressing distrust in ZEC's ability to manage elections fairly, confidence in result accuracy and perceptions of institutional impartiality. Key operational factors eroding trust

included perceived political influence in commissioner appointments, unequal treatment of political parties, and susceptibility to external pressure, opacity in voters' roll management and ballot procurement, and the non-verifiable results management system. The comparative analysis highlighted valuable lessons from Ghana's stakeholder engagement model Kenya's technological reforms and Botswana's consistent professionalism. The legal analysis revealed a gap between strong constitutional provisions for independence and weak implementation in practice, with the Electoral Act containing significant transparency gaps. Despite the deep trust deficit, a majority of respondents expressed willingness to trust ZEC if meaningful reforms were implemented suggesting that rebuilding confidence is possible through evidence-based strategies focused on transparency, stakeholder engagement, institutional culture change, and legal reform.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the entire research project on strategies that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission can employ to build public trust. The chapter presents the summary of key findings in line with the research objectives. Conclusions are drawn from the overall findings of the research. Recommendations are formulated based on the analysis of respondent views and data.

5.2 Summary

5.2.1 Summary of the Whole Project

Chapter One provided the introduction to the study. It presented the background, stating that public trust in electoral processes is the foundation of democracy and that Electoral Management Bodies worldwide face intense scrutiny regarding their credibility. The chapter revealed that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission suffers from a critical trust deficit, with only 38% of Zimbabweans trusting ZEC according to Afrobarometer (2022). This problem manifests from persistent perceptions of partiality, operational opacity, and the historical baggage associated with electoral management in Zimbabwe. The chapter also presented the purpose of the study, which was to propose actionable strategies for ZEC to build and sustain public trust. Five research objectives and five research questions were clearly outlined to guide the investigation. The significance of the study was discussed for various stakeholders including ZEC, political parties, civil society, and the academic community. Finally, the delimitations, limitations, and definition of key terms were provided to set clear boundaries for the research.

Chapter Two presented the literature review and theoretical framework. The chapter was anchored on two complementary theories: Institutional Theory by North (1990) and Social Trust Theory by Uslaner (2002). These theories provided a multidimensional lens for analysing the construction and erosion of public trust in electoral institutions. The chapter examined global and regional perspectives on electoral trust, identifying independence, transparency, technical competence, impartiality, and integrity as the five fundamental determinants of public trust in Electoral Management Bodies. Factors eroding trust were discussed at global, regional, continental, and national levels, including legalistic manipulation, executive encroachment, and politicisation of commissioner appointments. Trust-building strategies from Botswana, Kenya, and Ghana were examined in detail, highlighting the Botswana model of consistent professionalism, Kenya's technological reforms and their limitations, and Ghana's Inter-Party Advisory Committee as a model of stakeholder dialogue. The chapter also analysed the legal and institutional framework governing ZEC, noting the duality of progressive constitutional provisions and persistent practical constraints. Finally, the chapter identified gaps in existing literature, particularly the scarcity of prescriptive, strategy-oriented research that integrates comparative lessons from other African EMBs.

Chapter Three described the research methodology employed in the study. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide both statistical breadth and in-depth understanding. The study was guided by a pragmatist research philosophy, which prioritises practical consequences and supports the use of multiple methods to address the research problem. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used, where quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and then integrated during interpretation. The target population comprised eligible voters, ZEC officials,

political party representatives, civil society organisations, academics, and election observers. A multi-stage sampling strategy was employed, including stratified random sampling for the voter survey (target 60 respondents, with 50 completing the survey) and purposive sampling for key informant interviews (15 participants). Data was collected through structured surveys using Likert-scale questions and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Secondary data was obtained through document analysis of ZEC reports, election observer reports, legal statutes, and Afrobarometer survey data. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means), while qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. Ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the research process.

Chapter Four presented, analysed, and discussed the research findings in detail. The chapter revealed a severe trust deficit, with 64% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they trust ZEC to manage elections fairly, and 70% distrusting the accuracy of ZEC's results. The qualitative data confirmed these findings, with key informants citing the non-verifiable results management system as a "black box" that breeds suspicion. Regarding operational factors, 70% of respondents perceived that ZEC commissioners are not free from political influence, with the appointment process identified as the root problem. Additionally, 66% believed ZEC does not treat all political parties equally, and 66% believed ZEC does not resist external political pressure. The comparative analysis revealed that 60% of respondents were aware of electoral reforms in other African countries, and informants highlighted valuable lessons from Ghana's Inter-Party Advisory Committee, Kenya's technological reforms, and Botswana's consistent professionalism. The legal analysis showed mixed responses, with only 28% agreeing that the Constitution guarantees ZEC independence, while 50% agreed that the Electoral Act contains transparency gaps. Despite the

deep trust deficit, 60% of respondents expressed willingness to trust ZEC if meaningful transparency reforms were implemented. Key informants recommended making results management verifiable, establishing a permanent consultative forum, and changing ZEC's institutional culture from defensive to open and responsive.

Chapter Five is the final chapter of the dissertation. It provides a comprehensive summary of the entire research project, including the purpose, methodology, and key findings. The chapter draws conclusions based on the evidence presented in Chapter Four, answering each of the five research questions in turn. It also offers practical, evidence-based recommendations for ZEC, Parliament, and other stakeholders to rebuild public trust in Zimbabwe's electoral management body. Finally, the chapter suggests topics for further research, including the impact of transparent results systems, comparative analysis of stakeholder engagement models, and the political economy of commissioner appointments in Southern Africa.

5.2.2 Summary of Research Findings

First Objective: Assessing levels and determinants of public trust in ZEC

The research revealed that there is a severe trust deficit in ZEC. The study found that 64% of respondents did not trust ZEC to manage elections fairly. Furthermore, 70% of respondents did not trust the accuracy of ZEC's results. The study also found that 66% of respondents believed ZEC does not act in the interest of all citizens. Qualitative data revealed that the trust deficit is rooted in historical politicisation of electoral administration and lack of transparency.

Second Objective: Identifying operational factors eroding trust in ZEC

The research revealed that 70% of respondents believed ZEC commissioners are not free from political influence. The appointment process was identified as the root of this problem. The study found that 66% of respondents believed ZEC does not treat all political parties equally. Additionally, 66% of respondents believed ZEC does not resist external political pressure. Other factors included the problematic voters' roll, opaque ballot procurement, and the non-verifiable results management system.

Third Objective: Examining comparative trust-building strategies from other African nations

The research revealed that 60% of respondents were aware of electoral reforms in other African countries. Informants highlighted Ghana's Inter-Party Advisory Committee as a model worth studying. Kenya's experience showed that technology must be reliable and accompanied by broader institutional reforms. Botswana's Independent Electoral Commission demonstrated the power of consistency and professionalism over time.

Fourth Objective: Analysing the legal and institutional framework governing ZEC

The research revealed mixed responses regarding the Constitution. Only 28% of respondents agreed that the Constitution guarantees ZEC independence. Legal experts explained that while Section 238 provides strong provisions on paper, the problem is the gap between constitutional provisions and political practice. Regarding the Electoral Act, 50% of respondents agreed that the Act contains gaps affecting transparency.

Fifth Objective: Proposing evidence-based strategies for ZEC

The research revealed that 60% of respondents would be willing to trust ZEC if transparency reforms were implemented. Key informants recommended making the results management process transparent and verifiable. They also recommended establishing a permanent consultative forum modelled on Ghana's IPAC. Changing ZEC's institutional culture from defensive to open and responsive was also recommended.

5.3 Conclusions

First Research Question: What are the current perceptions and levels of trust towards ZEC?

The study concludes that there is a severe and protracted trust deficit in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. The majority of citizens, political parties, and civil society organisations distrust ZEC's ability to manage elections fairly and accurately. This trust deficit is rooted in historical experiences of politicised electoral administration. The study concludes that democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe will remain elusive unless this trust deficit is addressed.

Second Research Question: Which operational factors are most prone to distrust?

The study concludes that the most significant operational factors eroding trust are perceived political influence in commissioner appointments, unequal treatment of political parties, and susceptibility to external political pressure. The non-verifiable results management system is the most critical factor, as it creates a black box at the national tally centre. The opaque voters' roll and secretive ballot procurement also fundamentally undermine trust.

Third Research Question: To what extent does the legal framework facilitate or hinder ZEC's independence?

The study concludes that the legal framework presents a duality of progressive formal provisions and persistent practical constraints. The Constitution provides strong provisions for independence on paper. However, these de jure protections are undermined by de facto operational realities. The gap between constitutional provisions and political practice is the fundamental constraint on ZEC's independence.

Fourth Research Question: What lessons can ZEC learn from other African EMBs?

The study concludes that Zimbabwe can learn valuable lessons from Ghana, Kenya, and Botswana. From Ghana, the lesson is that institutionalised dialogue builds trust. From Kenya, the lesson is that technology alone cannot build trust without institutional legitimacy. From Botswana, the lesson is that trust is built through long-term consistency and professionalism. These lessons must be adapted to the Zimbabwean context.

Fifth Research Question: What strategies can be recommended to ZEC?

The study concludes that rebuilding public trust in ZEC is possible, as 60% of respondents expressed willingness to trust the Commission if reforms were implemented. Results management transparency is the most urgent priority. Stakeholder engagement must be institutionalised through a permanent consultative forum. ZEC's institutional culture must shift from defensive to open and responsive. Legal reforms are necessary to close transparency gaps in the Electoral Act.

5.4 Recommendations

The study revealed that the non-verifiable results management system is the most critical factor eroding public trust, with 70% of respondents distrusting ZEC's results. It is recommended that ZEC implement a verifiable results management system where polling station results are uploaded to a public online portal in real-time, allowing stakeholders to verify the official tally.

The study revealed that 70% of respondents perceive that ZEC commissioners are not free from political influence, with the appointment process identified as the root problem. It is recommended that the appointment process for ZEC commissioners be reformed to include public interviews, meaningful parliamentary scrutiny, and civil society participation.

The study revealed that the relationship between ZEC and political parties is adversarial, with 66% of respondents perceiving unequal treatment. It is recommended that ZEC establish a permanent consultative forum modelled on Ghana's Inter-Party Advisory Committee, meeting regularly with representatives of all political parties and civil society.

The study revealed that the opaque voters' roll and secretive ballot procurement are significant factors eroding trust. It is recommended that ZEC conduct an independent, externally audited clean-up of the voters' roll at least six months before each election, with the cleaned roll made publicly available.

The study revealed that the Electoral Act contains significant gaps affecting transparency, including no requirement for real-time results disclosure. It is recommended that Parliament amend the Electoral Act to include provisions for mandatory real-time public disclosure of polling station results and mandatory stakeholder oversight of ballot procurement.

5.5 Topics for Further Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following topics are recommended for further research:

Topic 1: The impact of transparent results management systems on electoral trust in Zimbabwe. A longitudinal study comparing trust levels before and after implementation would provide empirical evidence.

Topic 2: Comparative analysis of stakeholder engagement models in African Electoral Management Bodies. Research comparing Ghana's IPAC with models in South Africa, Nigeria, and Tanzania would identify contextual factors for effectiveness.

Topic 3: The political economy of electoral commissioner appointments in Southern Africa. Research examining the relationship between appointment mechanisms, commissioner behaviour, and public trust would inform institutional design.

Topic 4: Gender and public trust in Electoral Management Bodies in Zimbabwe. Research examining whether men and women have different determinants of trust would inform gender-sensitive trust-building strategies.

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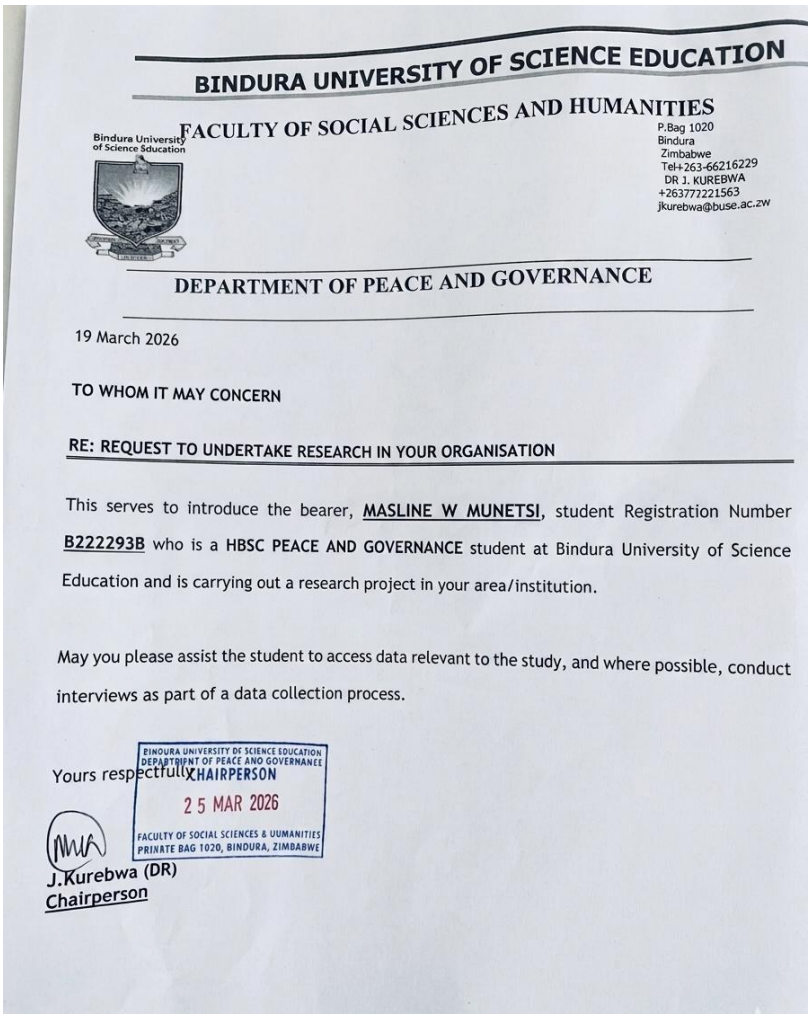
LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Permission letter



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DEPARTMENT OF PEACE AND GOVERNANCE

19 March 2026

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RE: REQUEST TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH IN YOUR ORGANISATION

This serves to introduce the bearer, MASLINE W MUNETSI, student Registration Number B222293B 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

BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF PEACE AND GOVERNANCE
CHAIRPERSON
25 MAR 2026
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
PRIVATE BAG 1020, BINDURA, ZIMBABWE

J.Kurebwa (DR)
Chairperson

Appendix 2

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

TOPIC

An examination of strategies the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission can employ to build public trust in Zimbabwe

My name is Masline Munetsi, a student of Bindura University of Science Education, pursuing a Bachelor of Science Honors Degree in Peace and Governance. I am undertaking a research on examining the strategies that can be used by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission to build public trust in Zimbabwe. This research is strictly academic and hence privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and voluntary participation will be ensured. If you are willing and ready to participate in this research please make sure you sign the consent form. Be assured that all information acquired from this research will be handled with confidentiality and your inputs will be anonymous.

SECTION A: TRUST DEFICIT

1. What causes public distrust in ZEC?

2. Which electoral process most undermines credibility?

3. How does ZEC's public engagement affect trust?

SECTION B: LEGAL & INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

4. Does the Constitution guarantee ZEC independence?

5. Are there gaps in the Electoral Act affecting transparency?

6. How does commissioner appointment influence perceived neutrality?

SECTION C: STRATEGIES & COMPARATIVE LESSONS

7. What immediate transparency reforms are needed?

8. How can ZEC strengthen its ethical culture?

Appendix 3

STRUCTURED SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

My name is Masline W Munetsi a student of Bindura University of Science Education, pursuing a Bachelor of Science Honors Degree in Peace and Governance. I am undertaking a research on examining the strategies that can be used by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission to build public

trust in Zimbabwe. This research is strictly academic and hence privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and voluntary participation will be ensured. If you are willing and ready to participate in this research please make sure you sign the consent form. Be assured that all information acquired from this research will be handled with confidentiality and your inputs will be anonymous.

Consent: I voluntarily wish to participate in this study……..Sign.

Instructions

Please select your answers truthfully. Use the 1–5 scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Age Range: 18–25 ☐ 26–35☐ 36–45 ☐ 46–55 ☐ 56+

2. Education Level: Primary / Secondary / Diploma / Undergraduate / Postgraduate

3. Province of Residence

4. Frequency of Voting: Always / Sometimes / Never

SECTION B: TRUST LEVELS

5. I trust ZEC to manage elections fairly.

6. I trust ZEC's results because they are accurate.

7. ZEC acts in the interest of all citizens.

SECTION C: INDEPENDENCE

8. ZEC commissioners are free from political influence.

9. ZEC treats all political parties equally.

10. ZEC resists external political pressure.

SECTION D: TRANSPARENCY

11. The voters' roll is clean and accessible.

12. ZEC provides information on ballot printing.

13. ZEC's tallying process is transparent.

SECTION E: COMPETENCE

14. ZEC registers voters efficiently.

15. ZEC staff are professional.

16. ZEC resolves disputes promptly.