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Women and Democracy in Zimbabwe

Insights from Afrobarometer

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Background¹

Women are mostly marginalised in African political processes, but they have one key area of equality with their menfolk, and that is in voting: The ballot does not discriminate, even if the results of the balloting frequently do not meet the expectations of the voter. Though not the democracy, elections are an important component of democracy, and even though studies indicate that African citizens have been losing faith in the value of elections, elections offer the only peaceful path for attaining and consolidating democracy (Moehler, 2005; Moehler and Lindberg, 2007; Logan and Cho, 2009; Logan, 2008a). But in the largely patriarchal societies that make up most African countries, do women have the same voice and level of participation as their menfolk?

As Logan and Bratton have shown, women across Africa hold largely similar views on democracy to men, but they differ in two important respects (Logan and Bratton, 2006). Women are more ambivalent, more frequently giving neutral or “don't know” answers to questions, and women are less convinced about the need for multiparty competition, expressing fears about divisiveness and greater tolerance of one-party regimes.

Logan (2008b) has also shown that support for traditional leaders, among those who have a traditional leader, is somewhat stronger among rural, older, and less educated citizens as well as among women, and correspondingly weaker among the young, urban, and better educated. Traditional leaders are important for understanding elections in Zimbabwe, as there has been considerable anecdotal reporting that they have adopted partisan political positions, can have significant influence over rural voters, and, given the highly patriarchal nature of Zimbabwe's culture, are likely to hold strong sway over women.

A recent report on the 2013 elections noted enormous improvement in the rate of voting by women (Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU), 2014), and it is evident from other Zimbabwean research that women see participation in politics as important and have increasingly participated, at least as voters (RAU, 2010). However, a significant factor affecting participation in elections, and especially since 2000, has been political violence associated with elections (Makumbe and Compagnon, 2000). Women surveyed by RAU reported relatively little political violence between 1980 and 2000, despite documented violence in Matabeleland between 1982 and 1987 and in association with elections in 1990 and 1995 (RAU, 2010). The big change came in 2000, with very high rates of political violence associated with the 2000 parliamentary election, the 2002 presidential election, and the notorious 2008 presidential re-run election (for an overview, see Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2009). A startling 62% of women surveyed said they experienced political violence in 2008 (RAU, 2010).

The 2010 sample also reported very high rates of feeling unsafe during elections, with 68% of women feeling “unsafe” or “extremely unsafe” during the elections in 2008, up from 22% in 2000 and a mere 5% in 1999 (RAU, 2010). Thus, it was highly encouraging that the recent RAU report, on the SiMuka campaign, indicated that so many women had turned out to vote despite fears about violence, and perhaps because of the more peaceful atmosphere prevailing since 2008. Nonetheless, as suggested above, voting is a minimal requirement for democracy, and in most views democracy is more than merely voting: It requires active citizenship.

Thus, when research shows that Zimbabweans have a high demand for democracy (for a broad overview of Afrobarometer research on Zimbabwe and democracy, see

¹ This section draws from the May 2010 report *Women, Politics and the Zimbabwe Crisis*, produced by the Institute for Democracy in Africa (IDASA), the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), the Research & Advocacy Unit (RAU), and the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ).



RAU, 2012), allied to a good understanding of what democracy entails, it is interesting to examine some of the oft-reported differences amongst Zimbabweans. This paper uses data from five Afrobarometer studies to examine differences between rural and urban Zimbabwean women in relation to elections and views of democracy.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is an African-led, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Six surveys have been conducted in Zimbabwe (1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, and 2012), and another survey is currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 2,400 respondents, yielding results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level.

This paper examines data from five Afrobarometer studies (1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, and 2012). Data relating to six key questions that were repeatedly asked of Zimbabwean citizens were extracted. The questions were:

- **With which one of these statements are you most in agreement? A, B, or C? Statement A:** "Democracy is preferable to any other form of government." **Statement B:** "To people like me, it doesn't matter what form of government we have." **Statement C:** "In certain situations, a non-democratic government can be preferable."
- **Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Zimbabwe? Are you:** Not at all satisfied; Not very satisfied; Fairly satisfied; Very satisfied; Zimbabwe is not a democracy.
- **There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.**
- **Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. Statement 1:** "Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Zimbabwe." **Statement 2:** "Many political parties are needed to make sure that Zimbabweans have real choices in who governs them."²
- **How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Traditional leaders/chiefs/elders?**³
- **Did you vote in the last election?**

Responses were collapsed into binary variables for each question. For example, for responses on trusting traditional leaders, positive responses – "somewhat" and "a lot" – were summed, as were negative responses – "not at all" and "just a little" – giving a combined binary frequency for two opposed variables: "trust traditional leaders" and "do not trust traditional leaders."

For each of the variables above, two cross-tabulations were extracted: gender and place of residence (rural or urban). The data was compiled as a time series for each question, with the time series dependent on whether the question was asked in a particular survey round.

The question relating to trust in traditional leaders was only asked in the 2004 and 2009 surveys, but the remaining questions were asked in each of the five surveys. The results are reported as simple percentages, and no statistical analysis was carried out.

² This question was not asked in 1999.

³ This question was asked only in 2004 and 2009.

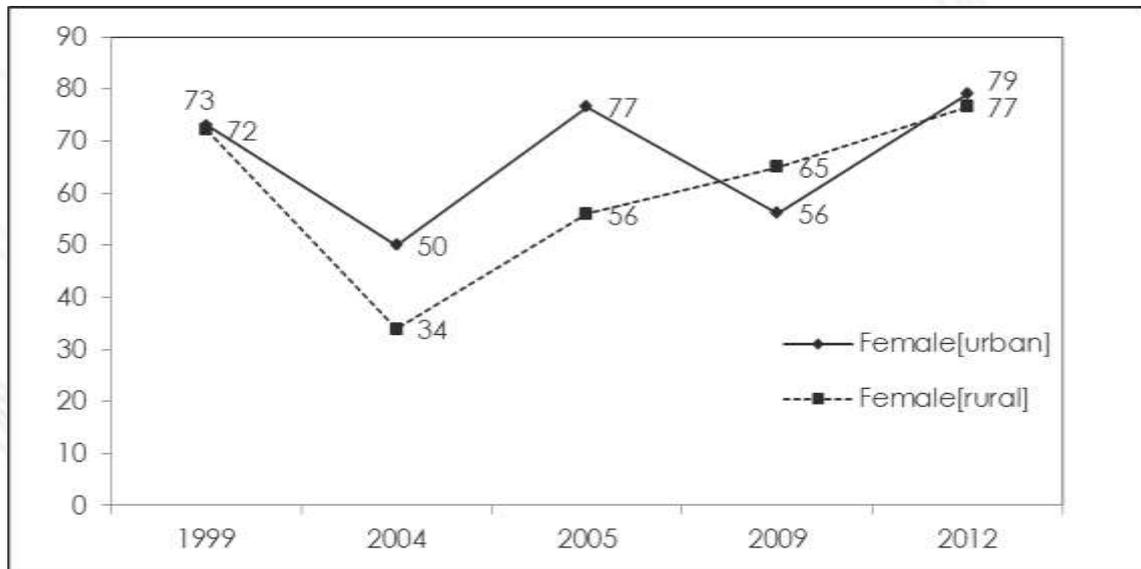
Results

Women and support for democracy

Rural and urban women differed in their levels of support for democracy in 2004-2009 (Figure 1), but both groups showed similar levels of support by 2012, perhaps because of the improved socio-political climate engendered by Zimbabwe's Global Political Agreement (a power-sharing arrangement brokered by South Africa after the failed elections in 2008) and the performance of the resulting Inclusive Government. Interestingly, there was a marked drop in support among both rural and urban women in 2004, probably as a consequence of the violent elections in 2000 and 2002, but thereafter both showed a trend toward preferring democracy to other forms of governance.

Urban women showed a marked drop in 2009, probably a consequence of the 2008 elections and the costs that women saw for participating.

Figure 1: Women's support for democracy | rural vs. urban

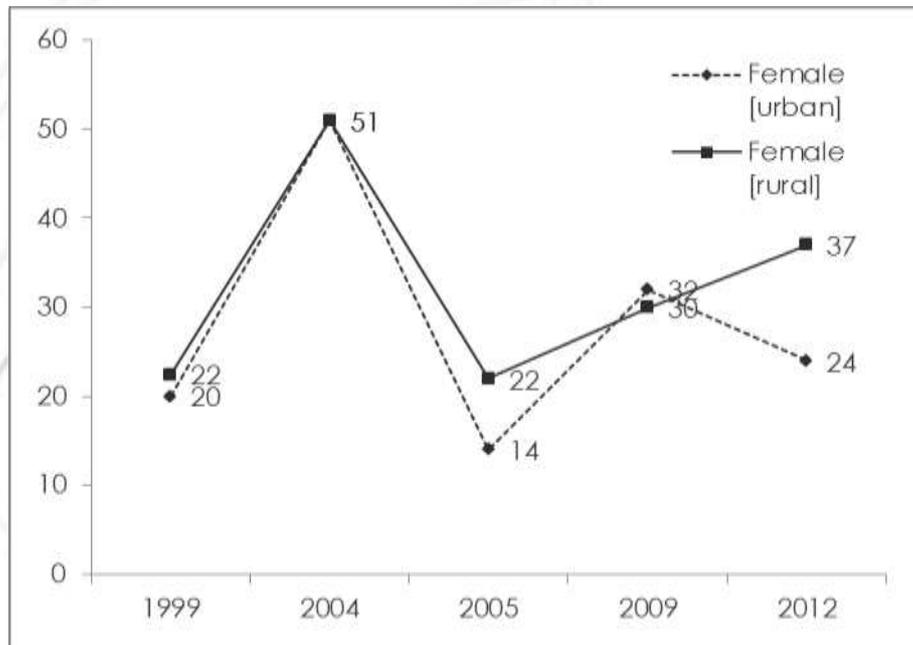


(% who said "Democracy is preferable to any other form of government.")

As can be seen in Figure 2, women's satisfaction with Zimbabwe's democracy has fluctuated since 1999 while always remaining low, with fewer than half of all women expressing satisfaction. The general trends are similar over the years, with both rural and urban women showing similar rises and falls in their levels of satisfaction. Rural women were more dissatisfied than their urban counterparts in 2008, perhaps as a consequence of the electoral defeat of ZANU PF, which has its major support base in the rural areas.



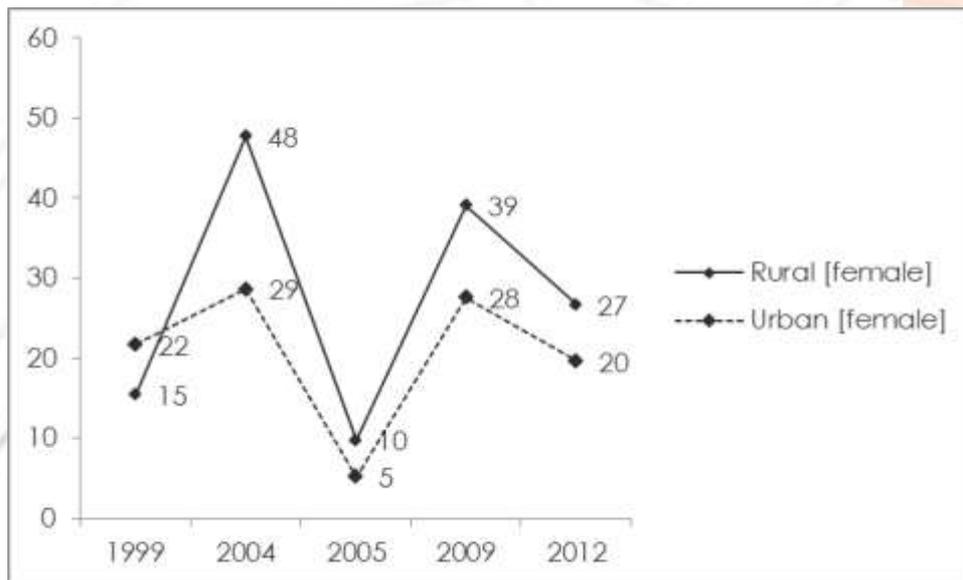
Figure 2: Women's satisfaction with Zimbabwe's democracy | rural vs. urban



(% who said "very satisfied" or "fairly satisfied")

Africa's "big man" syndrome and the domination of countries by single parties – Zimbabwe for 34 years now – raise the question of whether Zimbabweans are in favour of one-party states. In Zimbabwe, the issue revolves around the competitiveness of multi-party politics and the violence that has accompanied many elections, especially since 2000, with women often bearing the brunt of political violence. As can be seen in Figure 3, both rural and urban women have moved in their views over time, ranging from a high of 48% to a low of 5% approval or strong approval of single-party rule. Urban women generally show less support for a one-party state than rural women, and the trend overall seems to fluctuate according to the political context. The very large drop in support for one-party systems in 2005 is interesting in that it occurred for both rural and urban women and followed a period in which the fortunes of the MDC were waning, and it was argued in a provocative Afrobarometer report that the changes in support were due to the effectiveness of government propaganda (Chikwanha, Sithole, and Bratton, 2004). But it was also a period during which Zimbabwe's government came under sustained international pressure for its authoritarian nature, which may have affected citizens' desires for peaceful multi-partyism and a return to international acceptance.

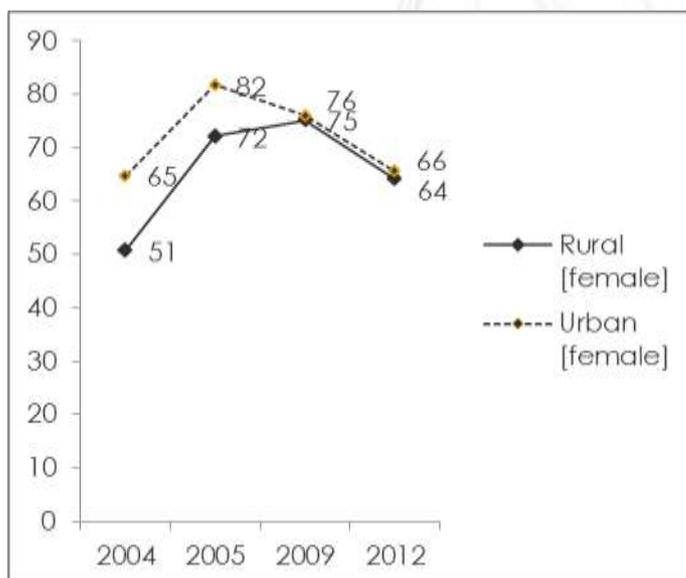
Figure 3: Women's support for a one-party state | rural vs. urban



(% who disapproved or strongly disapproved of the statement, "Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.")

The fact that women reject the one-party state does not necessarily mean that they are in favour of multi-party democracy. As Logan and Bratton (2006) pointed out, many African women see problems in the competitiveness that accompanies multi-party systems. In Zimbabwe, as can be seen in Figure 4, women's support for multi-party democracy grew between 1999 and 2002 but has been declining since then among both rural and urban women. This may be due to the violence accompanying elections, but also, additively, to the peace that followed the Global Political Agreement and the subsequent Inclusive Government. The combination of violent contested elections with the peace that comes from a government without any opposition may have reinforced views that multi-partyism is undesirable.

Figure 4: Women's support for multi-party democracy | rural vs. urban



(% who selected Statement 2: "Many political parties are needed to make sure that Zimbabweans have real choices in who governs them.")

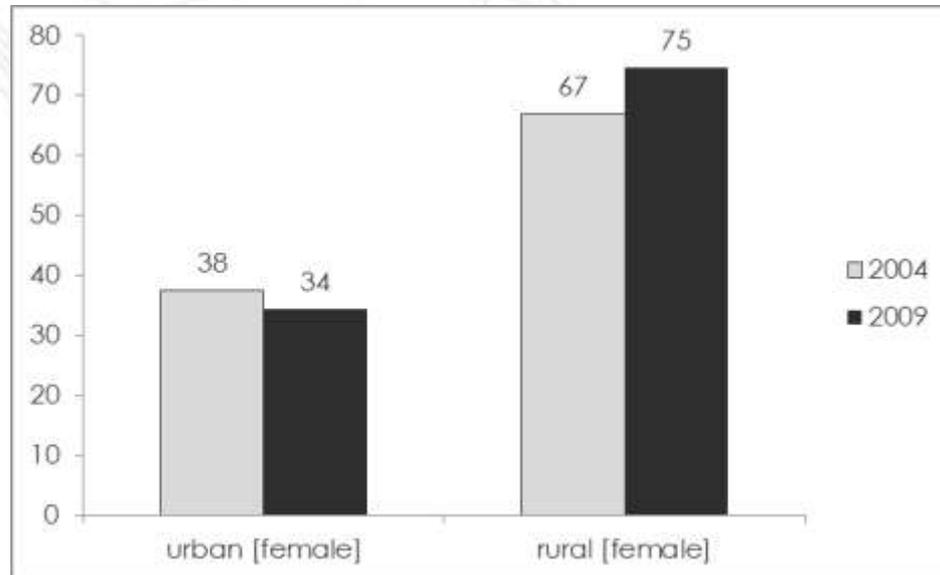
Women's lack of support for a one-party state and their decreasing support for multi-party democracy may be less of a contradiction than it appears: In voicing their concerns about multi-partyism, Zimbabwean women may be reflecting the problems that have accompanied elections in Zimbabwe, where competitive elections seem to invariably produce significant political violence. Thus, their attitudes to multi-partyism may be tied to elections, whereas their rejection of one-party states is perhaps a broader concern.

Trust in traditional leaders

Many media and human rights reports have focused on the role of traditional leaders during elections (for an overview, see Matyszak, 2010). Since 1998 and the promulgation of the Traditional Leaders Act, traditional leaders have overt (but legally limited) administrative power in Zimbabwe; even if legally required to be expressly politically neutral, their actual political preferences can give traditional leaders enormous local power, and it seems from most reports that traditional leaders act as if they have greater powers than those to which they are entitled.

The question regarding trust for traditional leaders was only asked in the 2004 and 2009 surveys. As can be seen in Figure 5, rural and urban women differ sharply in their levels of trust (a 41 percentage point difference in 2008). Rural women showed an increased level of trust in traditional leaders between 2004 and 2009, whilst urban women showed a drop over the same period. One obvious difference is that rural women have much more experience of traditional leaders than urban women, and the latter may well have been swayed by the adverse publicity that traditional leaders have received for their alleged role as partisans in elections and the distribution of public goods.

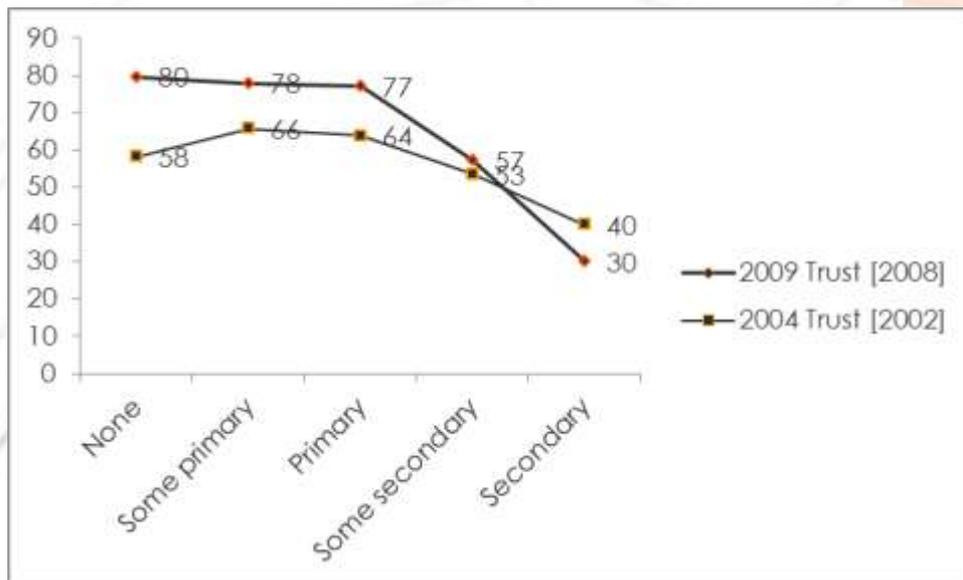
Figure 5: Women's trust in traditional leaders | rural vs. urban



(% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

However, neither group is internally homogenous, and Logan points out that there are differences in women's support for traditional leaders according to age and level of education as well as residence (Logan, 2008b). As can be seen in Figure 6, this holds for Zimbabwe, too: Both among urban and rural women, trust in traditional leaders shows a near-linear decline as educational level increases. Additionally, trust declines with education in 2004 but declines more sharply in 2009, perhaps reflecting the growing influence of traditional leaders increasingly critical reporting about their political role during this period.

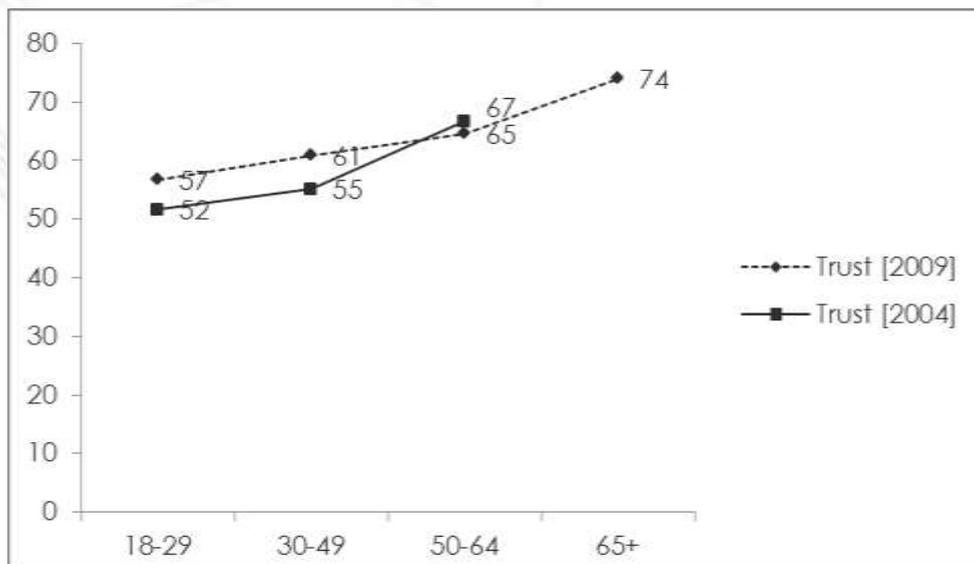
Figure 6: Women's trust in traditional leaders, by level of education



(% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

As regards age, it can be seen from Figure 7 that trust in traditional leaders increases somewhat with age, as Logan suggests, and has not changed much over time.

Figure 7: Women's trust in traditional leaders, by age



(% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

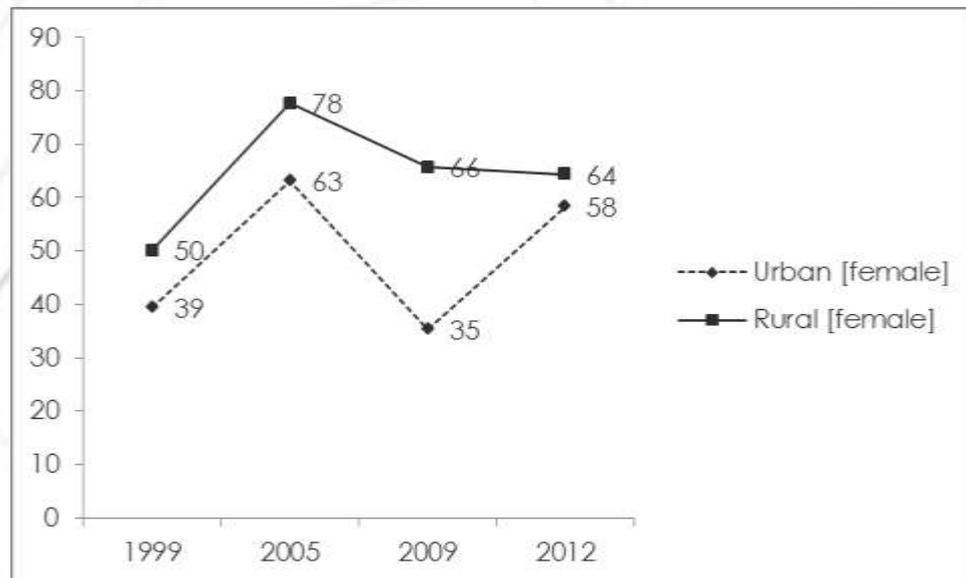
Women and voting

Many observations and studies have indicated strong differences between rural and urban women in registering and voting. For example, an analysis of the 2013 voters' roll showed many more women registered in rural as opposed to urban areas (RAU, 2013).

As shown in Figure 8, Afrobarometer surveys confirmed marked differences between rural and urban women, with consistently higher rates of voting by rural women. In addition, there is a significant drop in voting by urban women in 2005 (after violent elections in 2000 and 2002), but this recovers in 2008. This drop in 2005 suggests more than mere difficulty in registering and is perhaps the combined effect of difficulties in registering as well as fear generated by the political violence in 2000 and 2002

elections. When the environment became more peaceful, as it was between 2005 and 2008, urban women were more likely to participate, which is strongly demonstrated by a study of participation by women in the 2013 elections (RAU, 2014).

Figure 8: Women voting in elections | rural vs. urban



(% who said they voted in the most recent national election)

Conclusions

Female citizens of Zimbabwe seem to view the world in much the same way as their sisters across Africa, according to Afrobarometer data. Overall, Zimbabwean women support the notion of democracy but are not very satisfied with the variety that is practiced in Zimbabwe. To a degree that appears to vary with the political context, they also reject one-party government, support multi-party democracy, and vote.

When women are disaggregated by their geographical residence, a number of differences emerge. First, rural women have much greater trust in traditional leaders than urban women, but this varies by age and education: Younger women and better educated women are far less supportive of traditional leaders. Second, rural women are more likely to support one-party states but are similar to urban women in their support for multi-party democracy. Third, rural women are much more likely than urban women to have voted in all national elections since 2000, presumably because the consequences for supporting ZANU PF in the rural areas are both beneficial and unlikely to lead to violence. Finally, it seems that urban women's support for democracy, rejection of undemocratic alternatives, weak trust in traditional leaders, and willingness to vote (when the consequences of doing so are not problematic) present a more theoretically coherent set of views than rural women, whose responses may reflect their political experiences on the ground.

While far from conclusive, this limited analysis suggests that a great deal more might be gleaned from a gendered and more comprehensive statistical analysis of Afrobarometer data as a basis for interesting comparisons with other studies on women's voice and participation in politics in Zimbabwe. Too little attention is given to a gendered perspective of women's participation in politics, which may be more nuanced than is commonly assumed.

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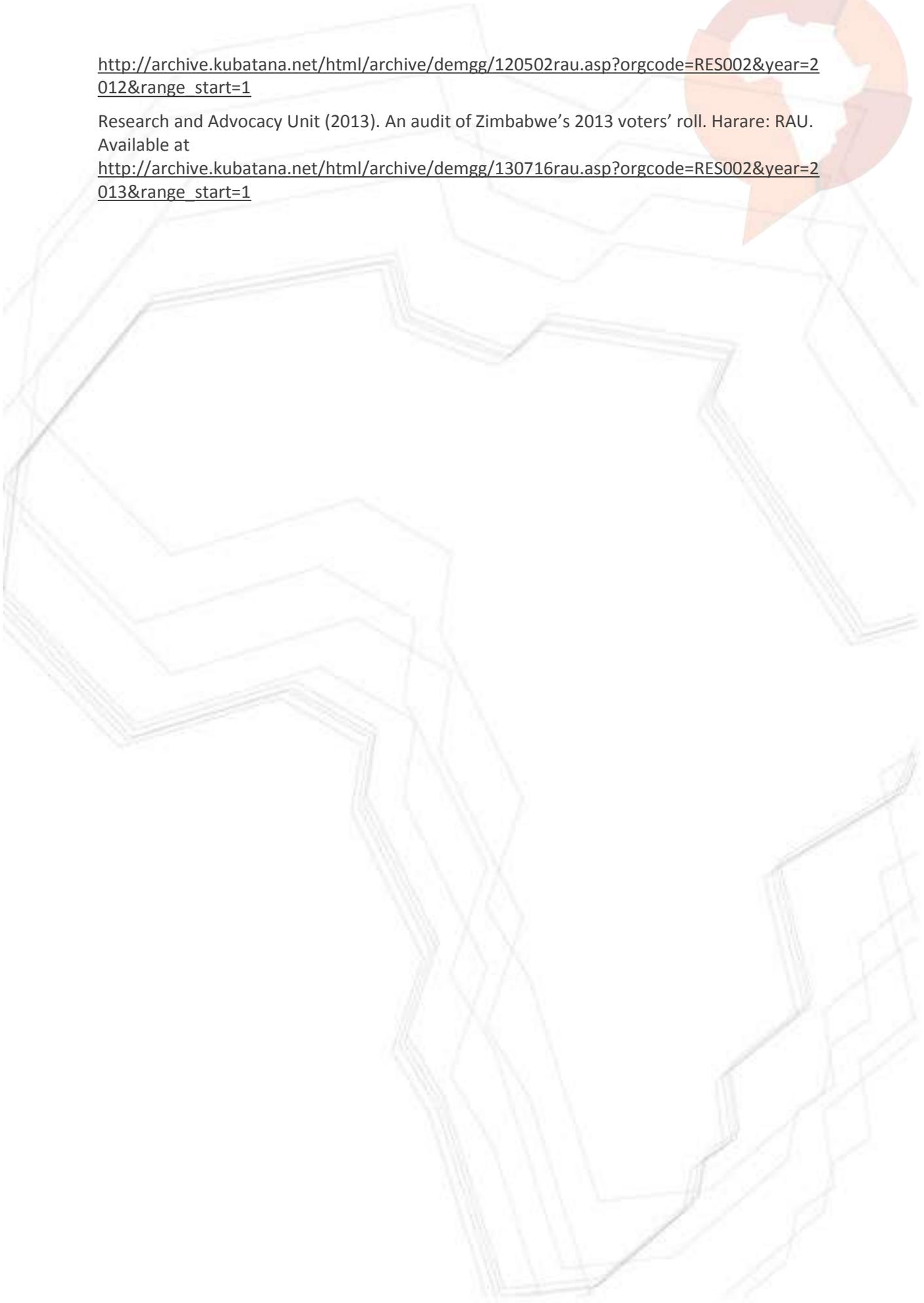
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For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.



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