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Generational Changes in Political Attitudes in Botswana, 1999–2024

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Abstract

Successive elections have different outcomes because individual voters themselves change their preferences (often because of shifts in what parties and candidates have to offer) and the electorate changes as older voters die and adolescents reach voting age (i.e. 'generational replacement'). This paper examines the contributions to the decline in support for the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) made by changing preferences and the changing electorate, using survey data for the twenty-five years from 1999 to 2024. In some respects, the preferences and attitudes of successive generations of voters have changed in very similar ways, with more and more negative assessments of the performance of the BDP and its leadership. In other respects, however, there are clear generational differences rooted in their formative socialisation in different periods: The generation of Batswana born before Independence were (and remain) significantly more attached to the BDP than the following generations. These are differences between generations, not simply by age or stage in the life cycle. Evidence from focus groups suggests that generational differences are in part due to urbanisation: Voters who migrated to towns or who grew up in towns were exposed to different influences than voters who remained in the villages of rural Botswana were. Historical loyalties rooted in early political socialisation are important, but the loyalties of many urban and some rural voters have been transformed by more contemporary experiences and assessments.

Keywords: Botswana Democratic Party, turnout, partisan identification, dealignment, urbanisation, political socialisation

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Introduction

The historic defeat of the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) in the 2024 elections followed a trend of falling support in successive elections (with some fluctuations around this trend). In the pre-Independence elections of 1965, the BDP won 80 per cent of the vote. By 1984, its share had dropped to 68 per cent. Ten years later it won only 55 per cent. In 2014, for the first time, it won less than half of the vote. In 2024 it won less than one-third. This paper examines the extent to which this trend was the result of changing preferences on the part of individual voters as opposed to generational changes in the electorate, as older voters died and adolescents became old enough to vote.

This paper uses survey data from 1999 to 2024 to track the changing attitudes of Batswana in three distinct generations or cohorts. We label as the 'Independence' generation voters who were born before or during 1966, i.e. the year that Botswana became independent. Most of these voters came of age during the final years of British colonial rule or under the first president of Botswana, Seretse Khama. As of 1999 – i.e. the first Afrobarometer survey – these voters were aged 33 and above. By 2024, the voters in this generation were aged 58 and above. We label voters born between 1967 and 1990 as the 'boom' (or Masire/Mogae) generation because these voters came of age during Botswana's long economic boom, which was fuelled by mining revenues, under presidents Masire and Mogae. The members of this generation were aged from 9 to 32 in 1999 and from 34 to 57 in 2024. We label the final generation, comprising voters born after 1990, as the 'crisis' (or Khama/Masisi) generation, because they came of age during the crisis years of the Khama and Masisi presidencies. The first election in which the oldest members of this generation could vote was in 2014, but they had been old enough to vote at the time of the 2012 survey. By 2024, the oldest members of this generation were aged 33.

This paper distinguishes between generational effects and the effects of age per se. Attitudes might vary over the life course. For example, citizens' attachments to a political party might strengthen as the duration of their support for that party extends in time. In any one cross-sectional survey, generational effects will show up as age effects. Studies that focus on one or a small number of surveys conducted over a short period of time often conflate age and generation effects. For example, whilst it is true that at any one time younger voters might be better educated than older ones, this is not an effect of age per se (i.e. voters do not get less educated as they get older) but an effect of generation (i.e. voters born in earlier decades were less educated than voters born in later decades). If

surveys are conducted over a longer period of time, then the effects of age and generation can be separated.

Distinguishing between generational and age effects is important for understanding past and future trends. Consider turnout. If it is true that voters are more likely to vote as they get older, then turnout is likely to be stable, as the effect of the death of the oldest voters is offset by the fact that younger voters grow older and more likely to vote. If, however, turnout is generational, perhaps because the generation of voters who experienced Independence shares a lifelong belief in the importance of voting, then the death of voters in that generation is likely to result in falling turnout over time.

Generational effects on voting elsewhere in the world have been studied largely through the prism of 'party identification' theory. Born in the USA in the work of Campbell and his colleagues (1960), this theory posits that many voters form political attachments on account of the home and local environment in which they grow up over a particular period of history. Campbell *et al*. further suggested that these attachments might strengthen over the life cycle, as they endure over a longer and longer period of time, i.e. there might be both age (or life-cycle) and generational effects. This research prompted fierce debate (see Abramson 1976; Miller and Shanks 1996; Wattenberg 2015). The evidence for generational effects appears robust. In the USA, a high proportion of citizens who were socialised politically in the era of the New Deal and Second World War formed enduring attachments to the Democratic Party. Many such voters proceeded to self-identify as Democratic Party supporters (and even registered as such) and generally voted for Democratic Party candidates throughout their lives. Sometimes these deep-rooted loyalties might be disrupted. In the USA, for example, disputes over civil rights in the 1960s led to a massive realignment in the South, as former Democratic loyalists swung permanently to the Republicans (Green *et al*. 2002). In Europe, also, the Great Depression and Second World War shaped the loyalties of a generation, or even generations, of citizens. As the American case shows, it takes momentous changes in the political environment to shift hitherto enduring attachments among adults. Generational effects might be evident also in other attitudes towards politics or values generally.

In this paper, we examine whether there are generational effects in Botswana with respect to voters' identification with the BDP or opposition parties (i.e. 'partisanship'), but we also examine whether there are generational effects with respect to turnout and voting intention. Our general hypothesis is that voters' formative experiences during adolescence and early adulthood had lasting effects on their engagement

with politics: whether they vote, how they perceive the BDP, and how they expect to vote.

There are obvious reasons why generational effects might be significant in Africa. Earlier generations of voters experienced the last years and then the end of colonialism. Subsequent generations experienced the rise of single-party states, economic crises, and structural adjustment. Later generations grew up in the era of multiparty elections, AIDS, and urbanisation. In South Africa, some scholars have examined whether the 'born-free' generation differs from preceding generations, and conclude that the differences are modest at most (Mattes 2012). Kuenzi and Lambright (2011) and Resnick and Casale (2014), both pairs using data from one round of Afrobarometer surveys, find positive age effects on electoral turnout in a set of African countries. These studies typically use data from a single survey and are therefore unable to distinguish between generational and age effects. The only study that assesses generational effects on voting in Africa using longitudinal data appears to be a study by De Kadt (2017), using data from a set of surveys conducted over an eight-year period. De Kadt shows that South Africans who were just old enough to vote in the country's first democratic elections (in 1994) were significantly more likely to vote in subsequent elections than their slightly younger peers who had been too young to vote in 1994.

We are not aware of any empirical studies of generational effects in Botswana. Numerous scholars have argued that support for the BDP has been inversely linked to age. Because they rely on cross-sectional survey data, these studies are unable to distinguish between generational and age effects. Seabo (2023), for example, shows that there was a clear bivariate relationship between age and support for the BDP in each of the 2008, 2014, and 2019 Afrobarometer surveys (although this relationship disappears in multivariate models). Such findings are often interpreted in generational terms, as a consequence of the strong attachment to the BDP and Seretse Khama among the older generation of voters (especially in Central District; Botlhomilwe and Sebudubudu 2011; Seabo 2023). In other words, these voters were more likely to support the BDP not simply because they were old, but because they had experienced Independence and Seretse Khama's presidency. Whilst the interpretation of the observed age effect implies that it is generational, we are unaware of any prior study in Botswana that has tested this using longitudinal data.

Methodology and Data

This paper uses primarily data from Afrobarometer's ten surveys in Botswana from 1999 to 2024, supplemented with an analysis of six focus

groups conduced in 2025. Afrobarometer's surveys allow us to track changes in attitudes over time within each of the three generations identified above. It is only now that we have longitudinal data over a long period – twenty-five years – that we can distinguish generational from age effects.

Figure 1 shows the shifting composition of Afrobarometer's samples over the ten surveys. The Independence Generation shrinks steadily. It accounted for almost half of the sample in 1999 but only 19 per cent by 2024. The Crisis Generation appears for the first time in 2012 and grows steadily thereafter. By 2024 it comprised 39 per cent of the sample.

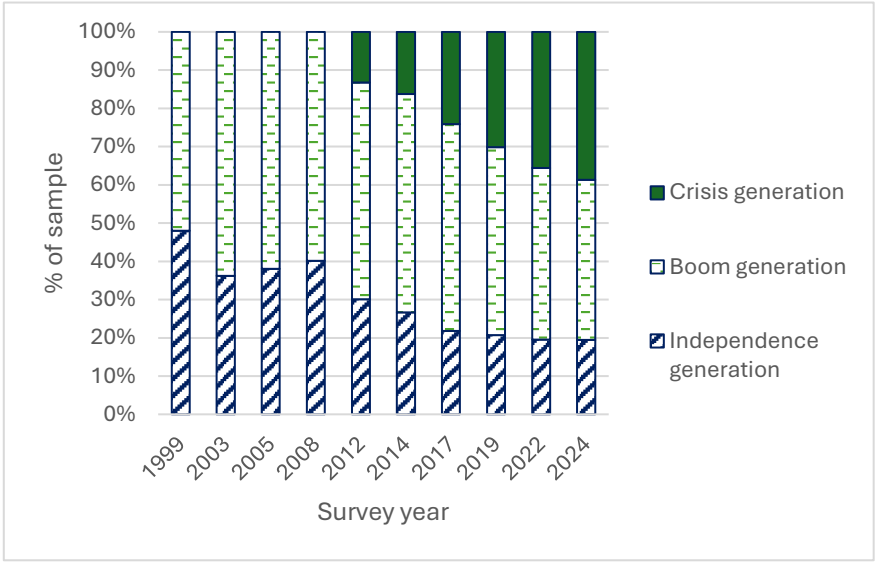

Figure 1: Survey samples by generation, 1999–2024

By analysing data collected over twenty-five years, we can separate the effects of generation from the effects of age. The members of the Boom Generation were the youngest voters in the Afrobarometer surveys conducted in Botswana between 1999 and 2008. From 2012, however, a younger generation entered the electorate. By 2024, the members of the Boom Generation were definitely 'middle-aged' with younger voters forming the next generation.

Afrobarometer surveys are collected face-to-face with countrywide samples of about 1,200 adult respondents per survey. In 2012, for example, Afrobarometer stratified the country's 'Enumeration Areas' (EAs, as defined by the previous year's population census) by district and urban/rural. A sample of 150 EAs was then randomly selected from these

lists with the probability proportionate to each EA's size in the overall population. Eight households were then randomly selected within each EA. An adult respondent was randomly selected within each of these households, subject to the requirement that every other interview must be with a woman.

The data analysed in this paper provide an imprecise picture of public opinion in Botswana as a whole. It is likely that some of the variation between surveys reflects minor changes in the realised samples or in the methodology. The 2022 survey, for example, suggests massive defection from the BDP since 2019, whilst the 2024 survey (conducted in July, three months before the elections) suggested some recovery. The 2024 elections, however, showed that support for the BDP had fallen further, not risen. Whilst it is likely that support for the BDP did fall in the three months between the Afrobarometer survey and the actual elections, it is likely that the Afrobarometer survey overestimated support for the BDP. We should beware of reading too much into shifts between surveys and should focus instead on the general trend over successive elections.

Our analysis reflects the limits of Afrobarometer data in other respects also. Most obviously, the dataset comprises a pseudo-panel in that we track changes in attitudes within generations, not changes in the attitudes of individual voters. The dataset also extends over a maximum of twenty-five years. Some questions were not asked in the first rounds, such that the variables extend over a shorter period. This means that we cannot track attitudes within the Independence Generation back to their early adulthood. Some of the data that we might like to use were collected only in one or a few survey rounds, which makes it difficult to separate generational from age effects. Moreover, whilst Afrobarometer asks many questions about voters' perceptions of the president and government, it does not ask many questions about the opposition. We therefore know more about attitudes towards the BDP and its leaders than we do about attitudes towards the opposition. Nor does Afrobarometer ask questions about past leaders, including Seretse Khama in particular.

We therefore supplemented our analysis of the survey data with six focus groups conducted after the elections, in 2025. The purpose of conducting the focus groups was to probe whether different generations of Batswana had different formative experiences that had enduring effects on their choices about politics. Discussions were guided by a short set of questions. The objective was to provide an environment in which participants might discuss political topics in the same way that they would do so in their homes or neighbourhoods, i.e. they would discuss the topics – and, on occasion, disagree – with each other, rather than simply answer questions posed by an interviewer.

We conducted three urban and three rural focus groups. Three focus groups were conducted in urban Tlokweng, on the outskirts of Gaborone. Three were conducted in Mosolotshane, a rural village west of Shoshong in the south-west part of what was formerly Botswana's Central District. In each site, one focus group comprised members of the Independence Generation, the second comprised members of the Boom Generation, and the third comprised members of the Crisis Generation. The focus groups were conducted in Setswana then transcribed, and translated into English. The six focus groups had a total of 32 participants. Focus groups included men and women.

Generations and Politics in Botswana

The following three sections use survey data to assess generational effects on turnout, partisanship, and declared voting intention. Subsequent sections consider some of the drivers behind these generational effects, using both survey data and the material from our focus group discussions.

Turnout

One measure of the attitude of citizens to their political system is whether they vote in elections. Studies of generational effects elsewhere in the world found that turnout varied between generations, even taking age (or life-cycle) effects into account (Blais *et al*. 2004; Gallego 2012; Kostelka and Blais 2021). We are not aware of any similar work in Africa.

For each election in Botswana, eligible voters must first register to vote. Only registered voters are permitted to vote. Official statistics distinguish between the number of votes cast as a proportion of the number of registered voters and the number of votes cast as a proportion of the total number of eligible voters, including people who did not register. Because registration rates can vary, the two ratios do not always move in tandem. Measured in relation to the total eligible population, turnout peaked in the pre-Independence elections of 1965, again in 1984, and then again in 2009. Turnout was lowest in the first two post-Independence elections (in 1969 and 1974), and between 1994 and 2004. Since 1999 – the year of the first Afrobarometer survey – turnout rose from a low of 42 per cent (of all eligible voters, in the 1999 election) to a peak of 62 per cent (in the 2009 elections), before dropping again in the 2014 and 2019 elections. Because registration rates dropped after 2009, turnout in relation to registered voters rose rather than dropped thereafter (Independent Electoral Commission 2019; see the Appendix).

In 2002, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) commissioned a study of voter apathy, prompted by apparently low rates

of registration and turnout. The study, conducted by the Democracy Research Project (DRP) at the University of Botswana, found that reported turnout was much lower among younger voters (DRP 2022). The IEC reports on registration by age group but not on registration rates in relation to the eligible population. A comparison with the age structure of the population according to the 2022 Population Census suggests that registration rates varied from about 60 per cent in the 26–35 year-old cohort to close to 100 per cent among Batswana above the age of 55.

In nine of its ten surveys in Botswana, Afrobarometer asked respondents whether they voted in the last elections. (This was not asked in the 2003 survey.) Because Afrobarometer's samples comprised adults aged 18 and older, in some years the samples included young adults who would have been too young to vote in the previous elections. Figure 2a shows overall turnout, i.e. the proportions of respondents who said that they had voted in the previous elections and had been old enough to do so.[1] The labels in the x-axis of the figure indicate the year of the previous elections and (in brackets) the year of the Afrobarometer survey when respondents were asked this question.

The data need to be viewed with caution. In some years (including 1999) the survey was conducted very soon after the elections. In others (including 2024), the previous elections were almost five years before the survey. It is important to recognise that the data in Figure 2a show what respondents say, retrospectively. If voting is seen as good, then some respondents might report that they had voted in the previous elections even if they had not done so (and even if, as the IEC data suggest, they had not registered). This inconsistency is likely to be much higher among younger Batswana.

In Afrobarometer surveys, a larger proportion of respondents say that they voted than the proportion of voters recorded in official statistics as having voted. Table 1 shows the official statistics on turnout by elections and the data from Afrobarometer surveys. In the case of the 2004 elections, for example, the IEC report that 76 per cent of registered voters and 44 per

[1] Respondents are shown as not voting if they said (in one or other survey) that they had decided not to vote, they were not able to vote, they were prevented, they could not find the polling station, they did not have time, they were not registered, they did not vote for some other reason, or they could not remember. Respondents with missing data or who said there had been no elections in their area (possible sometimes if a candidate was unopposed) are excluded. Respondents who were too young to vote in the previous elections are excluded. Results for the Crisis Generation are shown from the 2017 survey onwards because the number of respondents in the previous two surveys was small.

cent of eligible voters actually voted. In the Afrobarometer survey fielded in 2005, 69 per cent of respondents recalled that they had voted; three years later, the proportion who recalled that they had voted in the same elections was a little lower, at 66 per cent. Either statistic is much higher than the IEC's estimate of turnout as a proportion of the eligible population. There are two obvious explanations (assuming that the IEC data are correct): Either Afrobarometer's samples miss large numbers of non-voters, or many non-voters claim that they had voted.

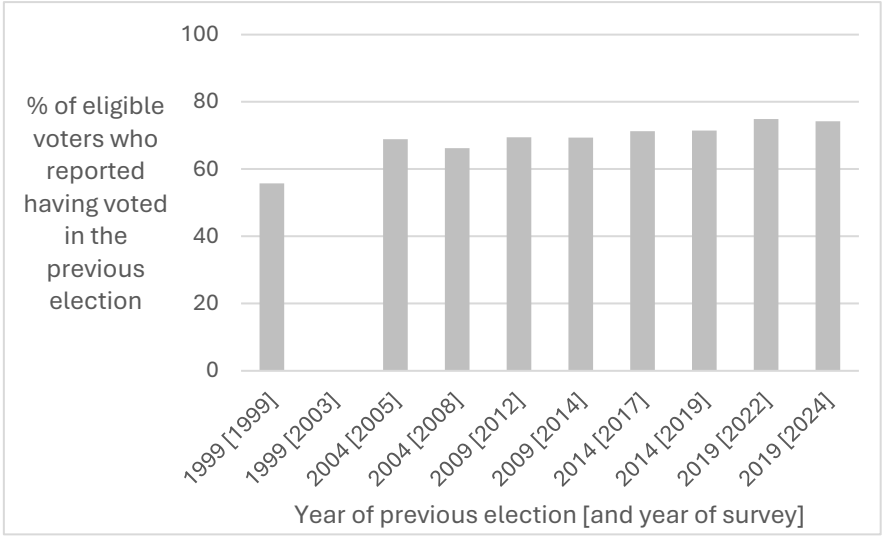

Figure 2a: Afrobarometer respondents who reported voting in the last elections

Table 1: Turnout: Official statistics and Afrobarometer data compared

Elections	Official statistics		Afrobarometer	
	Turnout as % of eligible voters	Turnout as % of registered voters	Turnout, according to first post-election survey	Turnout, according to second post-election survey
1999	42	77	56	–
2004	44	76	69	66
2009	62	77	69	69
2014	55	85	71	71
2019	49	84	75	74

The DRP's survey (fielded in December 2020 and January 2021, with more than 12,000 respondents) found that 71 per cent of the respondents claimed to have voted in the previous elections, i.e. in 2019 (DRP 2022: 32). This was a similar proportion to the 75 per cent reported in the 2022 Afrobarometer survey – and both were higher than the 49 per cent of eligible voters who (the IEC reported) actually cast votes in the 2019 elections. When asked how important it is that people vote, the respondents in the DRP survey overwhelmingly said that it was 'very important' or 'essential' (*ibid*: 33). As many as 84 per cent agreed with the statement that 'voting is every Motswana's duty as a good citizen' (*ibid*: 35). These results suggest that it is probably embarrassing for someone to admit that she or he had not voted. It seems likely that some respondents say that they voted in the last elections when they had not done so.

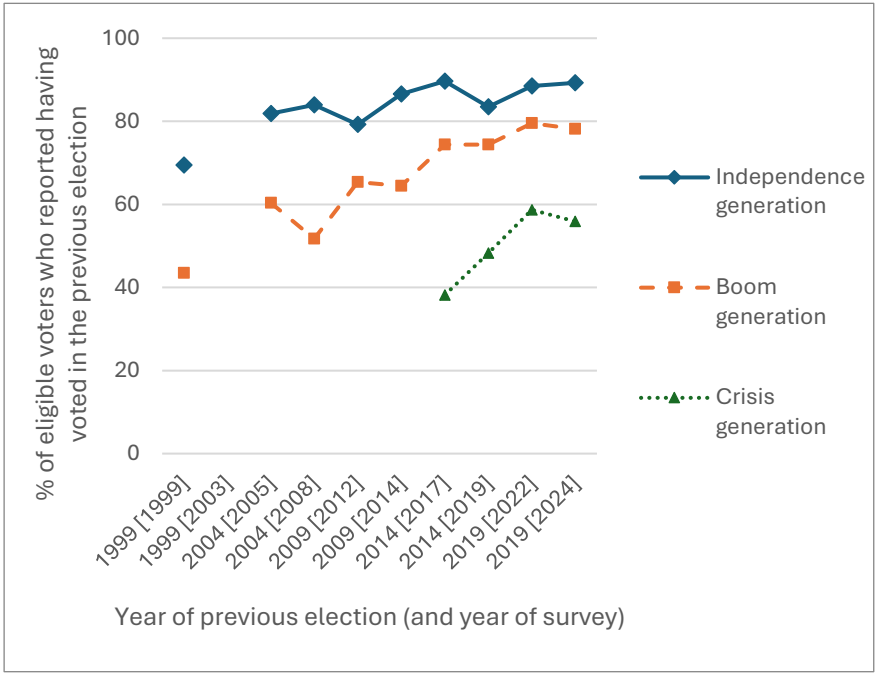

Figure 2b: Reported turnout by election and generation, Afrobarometer data

Figure 2b disaggregates reported turnout by generation, using the Afrobarometer survey data. The data suggest that there are both age and generational differences in turnout. Turnout by the Independence Generation is consistently higher than for the Boom Generation, with the Crisis Generation reporting the lowest turnout. But respondents in all three

generations report higher turnout as they get older, i.e. in the more recent elections. The increase amounts to about 20 percentage points, over 25 years for the two older generations or over a much shorter period in the case of the Crisis Generation. This might suggest that age has an effect on turnout. Further investigation suggests that this is not the case. Reported turnout has risen steadily over the 25 years of Afrobarometer surveys although the age distribution of the samples has barely changed. Each generation reports higher turnout at similar ages. Reported turnout in the 2019 elections by members of the Boom Generation was higher than it had been in the Independence Generation twenty years previously. Similarly, turnout in the Crisis Generation in 2019 was higher than it had been for the Boom Generation twenty years previously.

Data on turnout by age at a single point in time or over a short period suggest that younger people are less engaged politically, perhaps because they are less likely to see voting as a civic duty. Ntsabane and Ntau (2006) interpreted this as the effects of age rather than generation. Using survey data from 1989 and 1999, they suggested that younger citizens were disengaged – despite being better educated than their elders – because they lacked a 'democratic culture'. Ntsabane and Ntau suggested that there may be a lingering belief that younger adults (and women) should not be involved in politics. Moreover, they suggested, neither schools nor the media nor political parties had countered effectively this belief.

The DRP (2022) also analysed non-voting in terms of age. Their detailed analysis of their survey data (using a multivariate regression model) showed that younger voters were many times less likely to have voted than older voters.[2] The DRP (2022) also found that turnout might have been higher if voters felt that the political candidates were credible and there was a possibility of a change of government.

Using longitudinal data over a longer period up to mid-2024 complicates this analysis. Regression modelling shows that the statistical significance of age disappears when controls are added for generation and year (because overall reported turnout has risen over time). In other words, whilst reported turnout has risen over time, generational differences persist even when controlling for age. Successive generations have been less likely, relative to previous generations, to report having voted.

[2] It is not clear that the DRP excluded from the analysis respondents who had been too young to vote in the previous elections (held just over two years prior to the survey). The DRP reports later that 5.5% of respondents said that they had been too young to vote (DRP 2022: 42). Whilst this might result in exaggerated findings, it is clear that there was a large and inverse relationship between age and self-reported voting.

In the focus groups we conducted in early 2025, many participants said that young people were now interested in politics. It is likely that the UDC and BCP campaigns in 2024 – which heightened expectations of a change of government – were fuelled by, and in turn further fuelled, a new interest in politics among younger generations of voters. In other words, the 2024 elections might have reversed the trend evident in previous years. It is also possible that the change of government in 2024 will have an enduring effect in future on the Crisis Generation that is similar to the effect of Independence on the Independence Generation. This will only be evident ten or so years hence when we have data from a series of post-2024 surveys.

Partisanship

A second measure of political engagement is whether citizens identify with or feel close to any of the political parties. Seabo (2023) suggested that party identification (or partisanship) is likely to be stronger among elderly voters and weaker among young voters. 'Compared to older voters, younger voters should be guided by performance-based factors because of education that enables them to unravel the complexity of politics' (Seabo 2023: 20). In other words, he suggested, younger and more educated voters are more likely to vote according to the issues, whether these are viewed retrospectively (how did the government perform?) or prospectively (how will this party perform if elected?).

Afrobarometer surveys since 1999 have asked respondents whether they feel close to any particular political party and, if so, which party. Figure 3 shows that partisanship has tended to decline over time, but unevenly. The proportion of voters who say that they feel close to the BDP has fallen, from 40 per cent or more in the six surveys up to and including 2014 (with a peak of 55 per cent in 2008) to about 20 per cent in the 2020s. The proportion who say that they feel close to one or other of the opposition parties has fluctuated around an average of 25 per cent with no clear trend.

Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c disaggregate this by generation.[3] Identification with the BDP is consistently highest among the Independence Generation and lowest among the Crisis Generation, but identification with the BDP declines over time in all three generations. As with turnout, identification with the BDP appears to be positively correlated with age (in regression models), but this effect disappears when controls are added for generation and year. Being a member of the

[3] Respondents who answered 'don't know' or refused to answer, or for whom data are missing, are included in the 'none' category.

Independence Generation raises the probability of identifying with the BDP, being a member of the Crisis Generation lowers it. The survey year has a significant and negative effect from 2017. Identification with opposition parties is not consistently affected by the survey year and is highest among the Boom Generation (not, surprisingly, among the Crisis Generation).

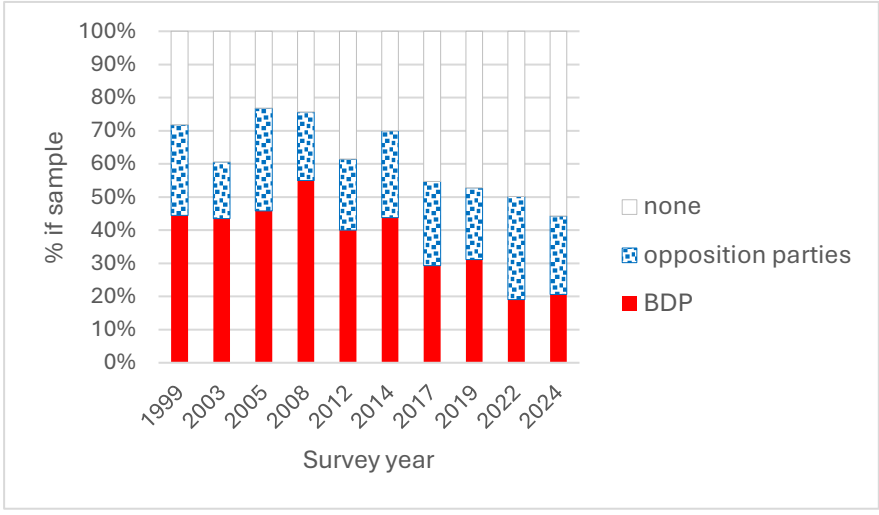

Figure 3: Partisanship

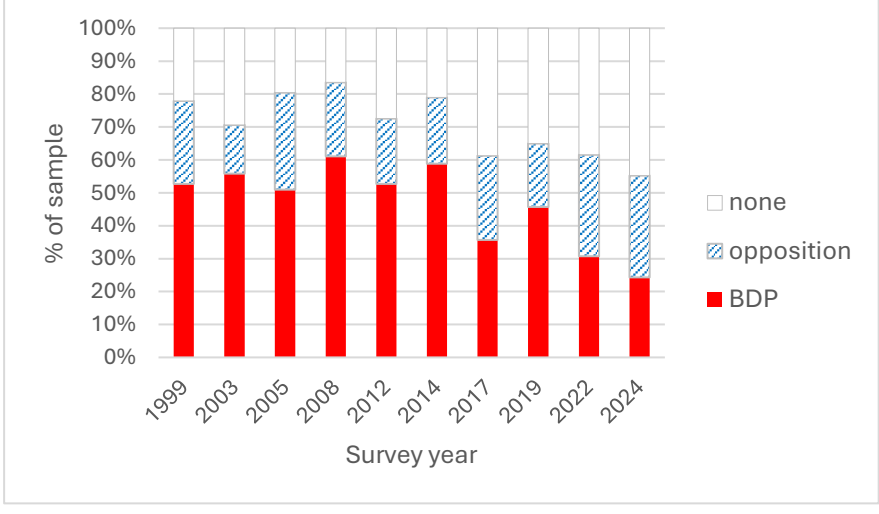

Figure 4a: Partisanship in the Independence Generation

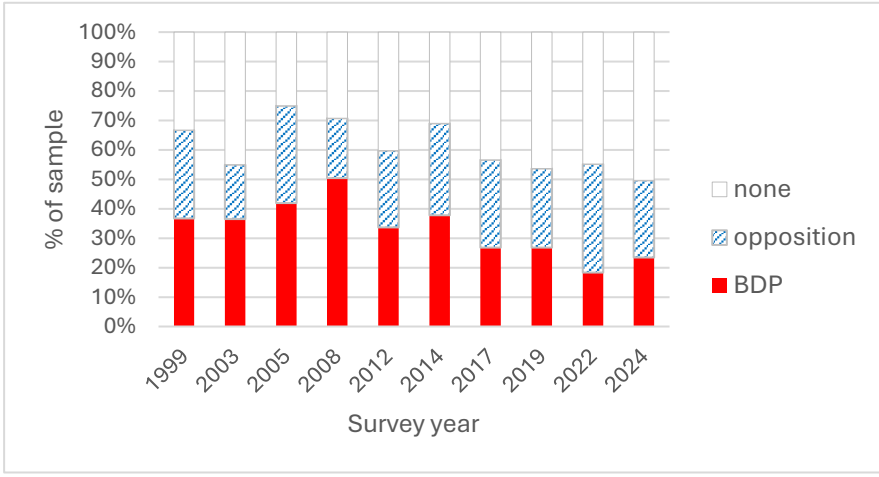

Figure 4b: Partisanship in the Boom (Masire/Mogae) Generation

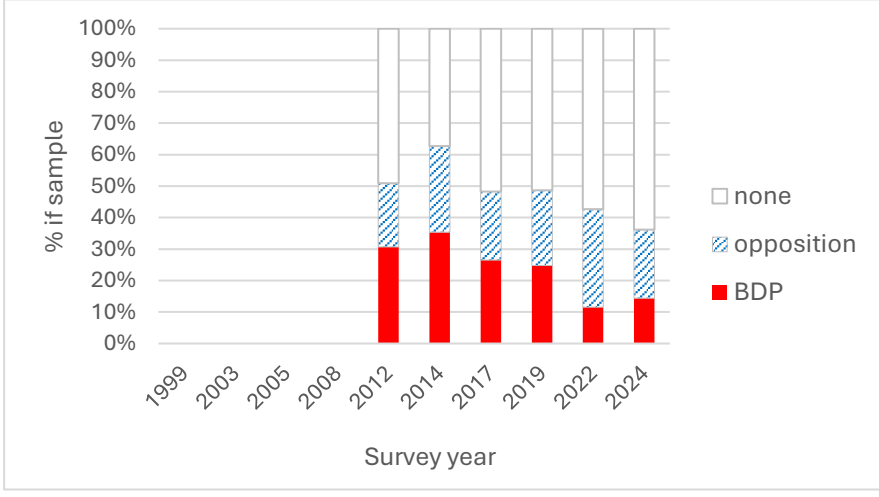

Figure 4c: Partisanship in the Crisis (Khama/Masisi) Generation

Voting Intention

From 2005, Afrobarometer also asked respondents which party they would vote for if elections were held 'tomorrow'. Figure 5a and 5b show the proportions who said that they would vote for the BDP or one or other opposition party. Data are available for the third (Crisis) generation only from 2021. More respondents reported an intention to vote for one or other party when the survey was held shortly before an election (as in 2008, 2014, 2019 and 2024). When the next elections were some way away in the future, more respondents said that they did not know or would not vote.

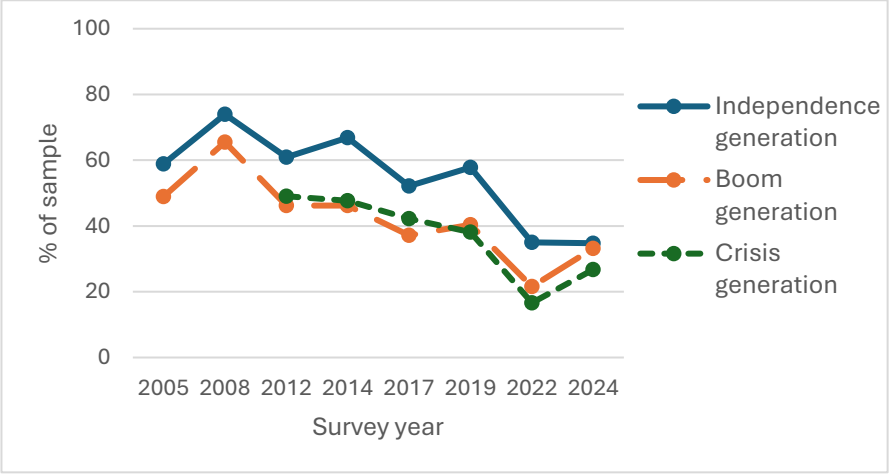

Figure 5a: Vote share for the BDP

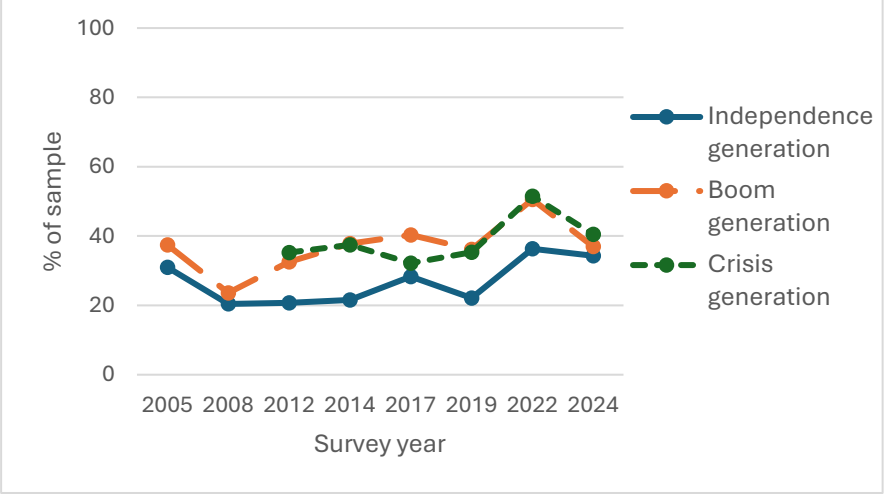

Figure 5b: Vote share for opposition parties

With respect to the BDP, there is a clear difference between the Independence Generation and subsequent generations. The Independence Generation is consistently more supportive of the BDP. In 2014, for example, close to 70 per cent of respondents in the Independence Generation said that they would vote for the BDP but less than 50 per cent of respondents in the later generations said this. In all three generations, however, the trend is clearly downward. In the early 2020s, less than 40 per cent of respondents in the Independence Generation said that they

would vote for the BDP. Conversely, the Independence Generation was generally less supportive of opposition parties. In all three generations, the overall trend in support for the opposition parties was weakly upward.

This pattern is broadly confirmed by regression modelling. Support for the BDP is positively correlated with generation (with higher support in the Independence Generation than in subsequent generations) and with the timing of the survey relative to the elections (with higher support when the survey was conducted shortly prior to elections). Age was of borderline significance, with a weakly positive effect. Support for any opposition party is correlated with being in the Boom Generation and (negatively) with age, but the effect of a pre-election survey is weak. The fact that support for the BDP is affected more than support for the opposition in a pre-election survey year suggests that the BDP has benefited from the advantages of incumbency and perhaps has campaigned more effectively.

Conclusion

The analysis of generational patterns in voter behaviour reveals a pattern in which the Independence Generation has consistently been more committed to voting, felt closer to the ruling BDP, and been more likely to vote for that party, even when controlling for age. Over time, members of all three generations reported that they were more likely to vote. Over time, fewer and fewer members of all three generations felt close to or intended to vote for the BDP. Generational effects have persisted despite a general trend of disaffection with the BDP.

Generational effects were less evident with respect to attitudes towards the opposition parties. Surprisingly, perhaps, the opposition parties seemed increasingly to be supported primarily by members of the Boom Generation rather than the later Crisis Generation.

The Drivers Behind Patterns

The survey data suggest that there have been generational effects with respect to turnout, partisanship and voting intention. Members of the Independence Generation appear to be more likely to vote, more likely to identify with one or other political party, and more likely to vote for the BDP than members of the later generations are. Are these generational differences (and their changes over time) related to other attitudes measured in Afrobarometer surveys?

Seabo (2023), using Afrobarometer data from 2008, 2014, and 2019, found that voting behaviour in Botswana was shaped by a combination of sociological factors and rational-choice performance factors, with performance-based evaluations having the strongest influence

on voter intentions. Seabo did examine partisanship but did so through a measure of partisanship in general (i.e. with any party) rather than partisan identification with a particular party (such as the BDP). It is therefore unsurprising that he found little correlation between partisanship (in general) and intended voting patterns. Seabo found that sociological factors were significant. He considered individuals' membership in social groups by highlighting the role of demographic and social inequalities such as education, socio-economic status, gender, and age. These factors did matter, but (Seabo concludes) were less important than voters' assessment of how effectively the government had been handling the country's most pressing challenges. In other words, according to Seabo, Batswana were primarily retrospective issue-voters, swayed primarily by their assessment of government performance.[4]

This leads us to ask whether the generational effects identified above were in some way the result of citizens' assessments of government performance. When there were differences between generations, was this due to differences in their assessments of government performance? Where there were small or no differences, did this reflect consensus on assessments? Where generational effects diminished over time, was this because generations converged in their assessments?

Most Important Problems

The starting-point for this analysis is the data on what citizens considered to be the most pressing challenges facing the government. This provides a foundation for assessing how citizens perceive the government's handling of those issues, and then assessing trends in public trust in and assessment of the president over time. The assumption is that, if voters see a particular issue as the most significant problem and believe the government is performing poorly in addressing it, this negative evaluation will shape their overall perception of government performance and of the president and, ultimately, influence their voting behaviour.

In every survey, Afrobarometer asks respondents what they think is the most important problem facing Botswana that the government should address. Respondents are then asked to identify a second and then third important problem. In 1999, respondents gave a huge variety of answers. From 2003, responses were recorded under a more manageable number of pre-coded options. We divide the response options into nine categories:

[4] Given his puzzling specification of partisanship, however, it is difficult to know what to make of his modelling and the conclusions he draws. An alternative specification of partisanship might well result in a rather different conclusion.

1. Unemployment
2. Other economic problems
3. Poverty
4. Drought and agriculture
5. Health (including AIDS)
6. Education
7. Other infrastructure
8. Governance, politics, and crime
9. Other.

Figures 6a, 6b and 6c show the most important problem by year for each of the three generations.

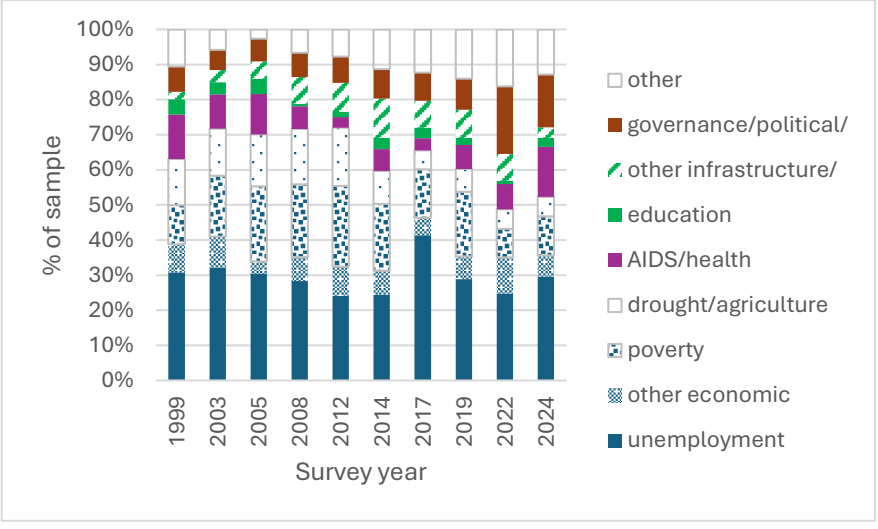

Figure 6a: Most important problem facing Botswana, as identified by the Independence Generation

The various categories of economic problem dominate for all three generations. Unemployment (including job creation) is identified by more people than any other problem in every generation and in every survey. The prioritisation of unemployment rises and falls slightly over time in parallel for all three generations.

There are significant differences between the generations. The Boom and Crisis Generations prioritise unemployment more than the Independence Generation. The Independence Generation is more likely to prioritise AIDS/health, poverty, and drought/agriculture than the subsequent generations. The absence of any clear trend over time within each generation suggests that this is not an effect of age. It is very likely to be a generational effect. The Independence Generation is the only one that lived through the terrible drought and poverty of the 1960s, prior to the rapid economic growth and institutionalised drought relief from the 1970s.

It was also the generation most aware of the ravages of AIDS in the 1990s, prior to the rollout of antiretroviral drugs.

Governance and political problems grew sharply in importance for all generations in the early 2020s.

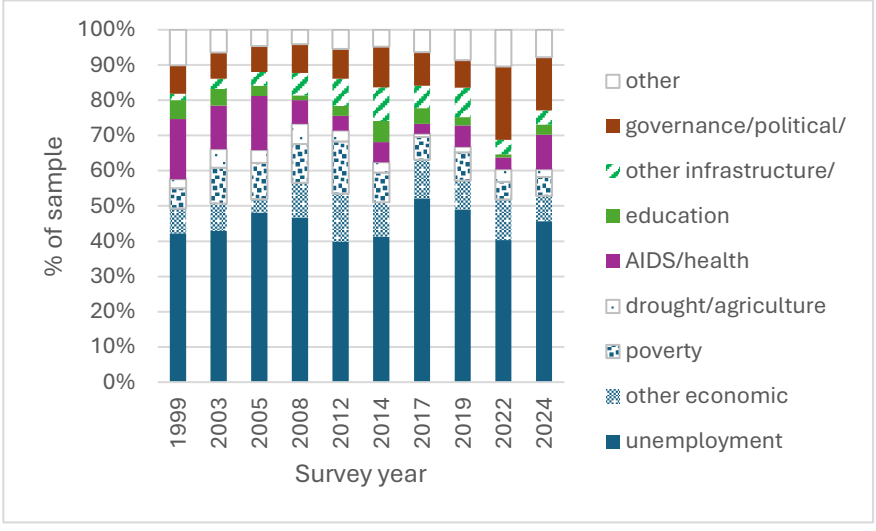

Figure 6b: Most important problem facing Botswana, as identified by the Boom Generation

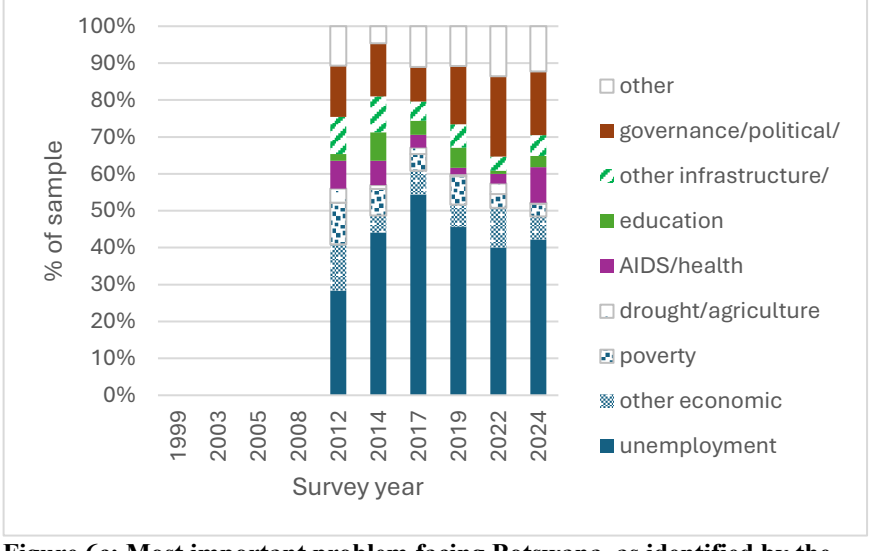

Figure 6c: Most important problem facing Botswana, as identified by the Crisis Generation

President and Government Performance

Afrobarometer has (since 1999) asked respondents how well they think the government is handling a set of issues. Respondents choose between 'very badly', 'fairly badly', 'fairly well', and 'very well'. These responses can be weighted to provide an overall positive or negative assessment, with 'very badly' coded as -2, 'fairly badly' as -1, 'fairly well' as +1 and 'very well' as +2. Figures 7a, 7b, 7c, and 7d below show the average assessments of respondents in each generation by year for four different issues: managing the economy, creating jobs, keeping prices stable, and (from 2003) narrowing the income gap between rich and poor people.[1]

The data show clear discontent within all three generations with the government's performance on three of these issues. Only with respect to managing the economy did most respondents approve of the government's performance – and then only until 2022, when approval plummeted (rising slightly but remaining negative in 2024).

For our purposes, what is striking is the similarity between the three generations. There is often no significant difference between the generations. Occasionally there was a very modest difference.

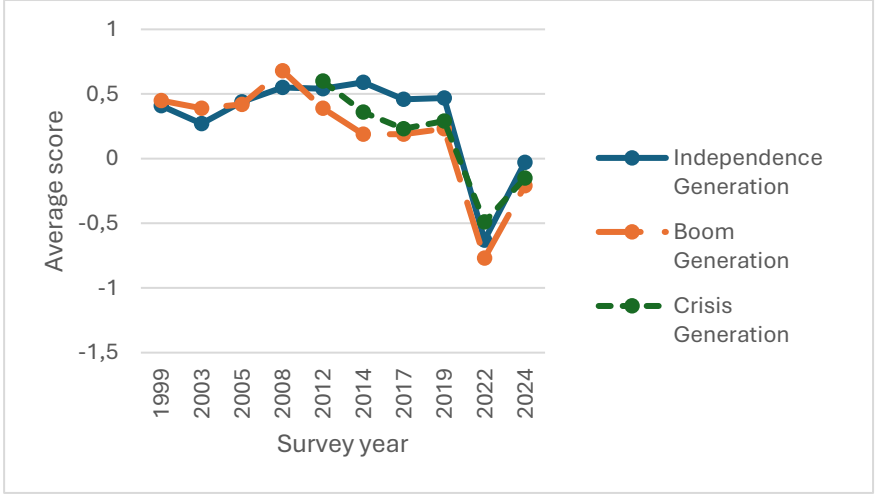

Figure 7a: Positive assessment of government performance in managing the economy, by generation

[1] Unsurprisingly, the standard deviations on these scores are large, at >1.

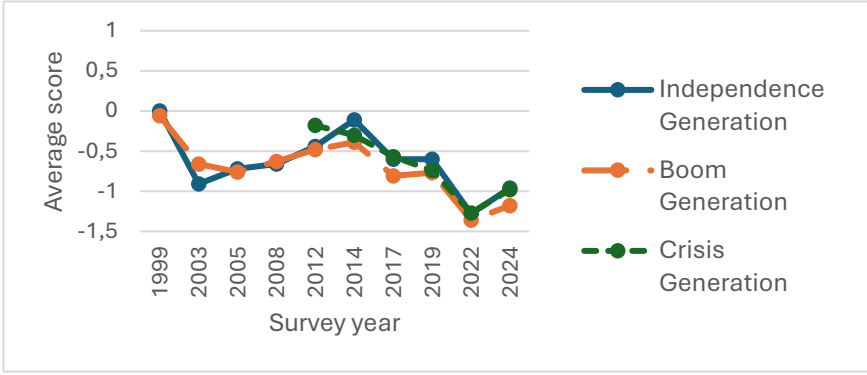

Figure 7b: Positive assessment of government performance in creating jobs, by generation

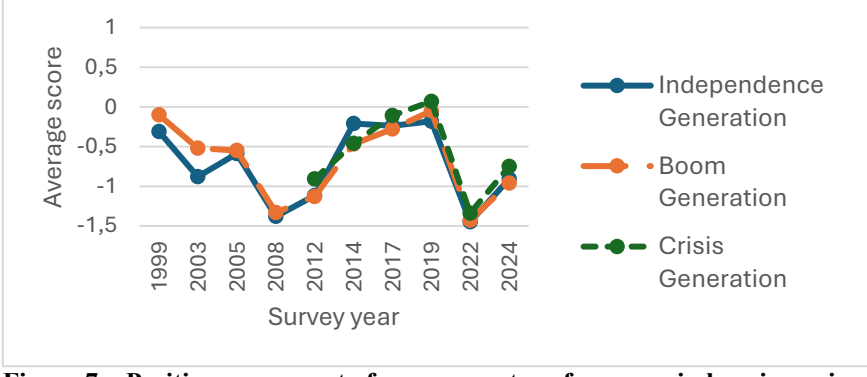

Figure 7c: Positive assessment of government performance in keeping prices stable, by generation

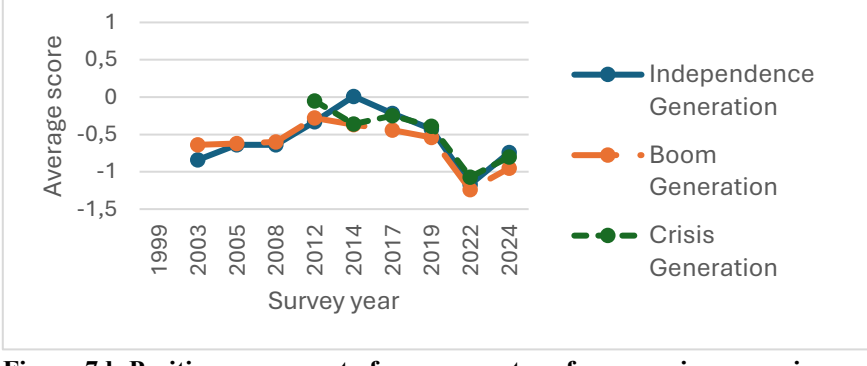

Figure 7d: Positive assessment of government performance in narrowing income gaps, by generation

In addition to asking about the performance of the government, Afrobarometer asks respondents if they approve or disapprove of the way that the president has performed over the past 12 months. The response options include 'strongly disapprove', 'disapprove', 'approve', and 'strongly approve'. These have been recoded in the same way as the previous performance variables, with negative and positive scores from a minimum value of -2 and a maximum value of +2. Figure 8 shows assessments from 2003 to 2024.

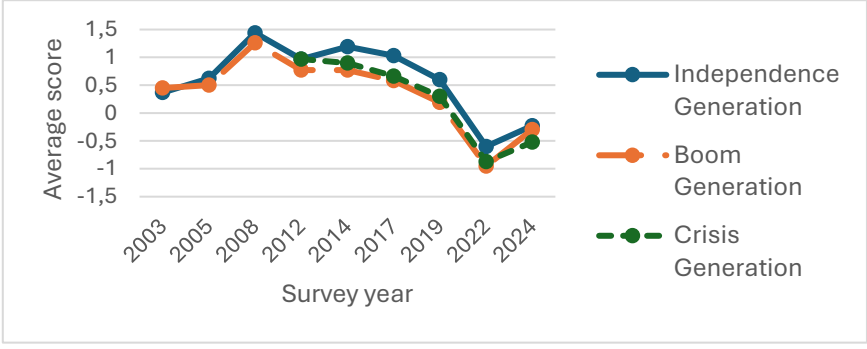

Figure 8: Approval of presidential performance, by generation

Assessments of the performance of the president are much more positive than assessments of the performance of the government with respect to the challenges shown in the preceding figures. Only in 2022 and 2024 were assessments of presidential performance negative on average. Presidential performance received the most positive assessments in 2008 (soon after Ian Khama took over from Festus Mogae) and remained positive in 2012, 2014, and 2017. In 2019 – about one year into the presidency of Mokgweetsi Masisi – assessments began to worsen, before they plummeted in 2022 and rose moderately in 2024.

The Independence Generation has generally been a little more positive in its assessment of presidential performance than subsequent generations, but the difference is not large. Assessments in all three generations rise and fall in parallel.

Respondents have also been asked (from 2003) how much they trust the president and the ruling party (i.e. the BDP through all survey rounds hitherto). Response options include 'a lot', 'somewhat', 'a little', and 'not at all'. These have been recoded to correspond with the assessments of performance, with 'a lot' coded as +2, 'somewhat' as +1, 'a little' as -1 and 'not at all' as -2. Figures 9a and 9b show how trust has changed over time for each generation. The trust variables generally track presidential

performance. The Independence Generation is more trusting of both presidents and the BDP than later generations. This generational difference is more marked than for presidential performance.

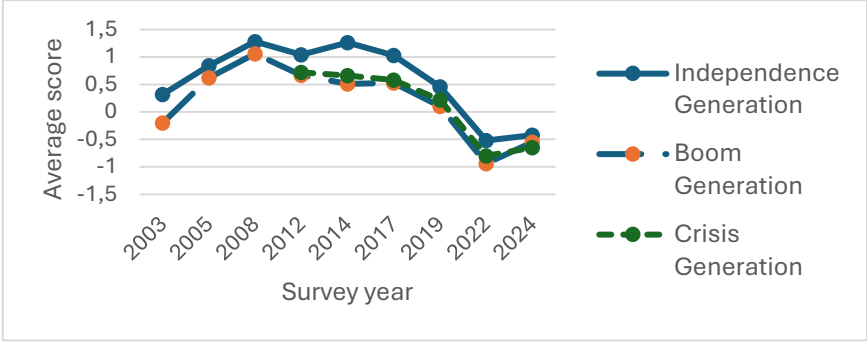

Figure 9a: Trust in the president

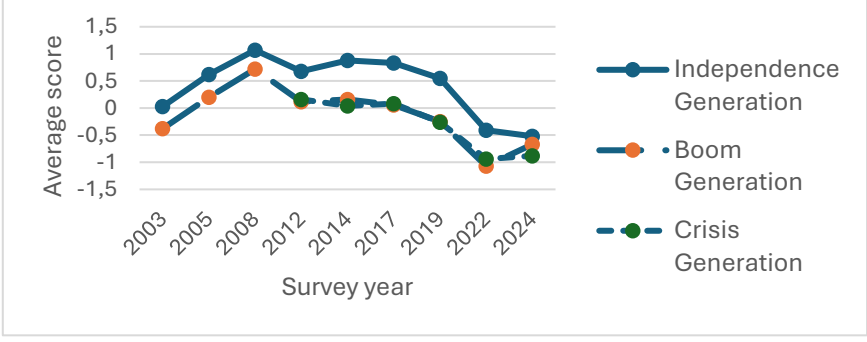

Figure 9b: Trust in the BDP

Comparing the data on trust in the president (or in the BDP) with data on assessed performance or partisan identification suggests that the trust variable falls somewhere between partisan identification (i.e. an underlying and enduring attachment) and the more immediate assessment of presidential or government performance. High levels of trust in presidents Mogae and Khama might have reflected higher levels of BDP partisanship just as low levels of trust in Masisi might have contributed to the decline in BDP partisanship.

Conclusion

The data on what voters think are the most important problems facing Botswana, how they think the government and president have performed,

and how much they trust presidents and the BDP point to clear similarities between the generations. Opinions differ in each generation, but the average values of most of these variables show a clear pattern over time: The different generations broadly agree on the problems facing Botswana and their assessments of the government's performance rise and fall together. Their trust in the president and BDP also rises and falls in parallel.

Some variables show persistent generational differences despite their moving in parallel over time. Most clearly, the Independence Generation is consistently more trusting of both presidents and the BDP, although this generation's average level of trust rises and falls in parallel with the later generations. This conforms with the picture that emerged above: Relative to later generations, the Independence Generation has an enduring attachment to the BDP, successive presidents from the BDP, and elections. This is despite their views on the problems facing the country and on the government's performance being very similar to those of later generations.

Similarities and Differences Between Generations: Evidence from Focus Groups

The survey data from Afrobarometer surveys spanning 1999–2024 indicated that economic concerns, specifically employment and poverty, were dominant concerns across all generations. To complement the quantitative findings, we conducted six focus groups after the elections to probe how the three generations experienced politics, especially during formative periods of political socialisation. While the Afrobarometer data highlight trends and patterns, the focus group discussions reveal more fully the reasoning and lived experiences behind these patterns. The focus group interviews were designed to contextualize and interpret the survey findings, not to replace them.

The six focus groups comprised a total of 32 participants, with similar numbers of men and women. Three groups were conducted in 'rural' Mosolotshane, a generally poor village west of Shoshong, i.e. about 250 km north-west of Gaborone. Whilst Shoshong generally was a BDP stronghold until the 2010s, the ward elections in Mosolotshane were contested and occasionally won by a local Botswana National Front (BNF) activist. Three groups were conducted in 'urban' Tlokweng, which has grown from an old village into the eastern suburbs of greater Gaborone. Almost everyone living in Mosolotshane comes from the area. The village is a place which people leave. Many people living in Tlokweng have moved there from elsewhere. It – like much of Gaborone – is a place where

people go. Tlokweng has been represented by MPs from the BNF from 2004 to 2019.

The focus groups were conducted in Setswana using a semi-structured discussion guide. Discussions were later transcribed and translated into English.

Rural Independence Generation

The participants in the rural Independence Generation focus group appeared to present an almost textbook case of deep-rooted partisan identification (combined, in some cases, with defection in later life). Their original loyalties were forged in adolescence or early adulthood, in part because of family influence: 'Our parents loved BDP so much and mostly supported it. … I have been a Democrat, and I don't think I will ever change; my parents were Democrats and all my siblings'. Another woman said: 'I started voting in 1984, … I vote my chief's party and I don't think I will ever change'. Another woman supported this by saying: 'I voted for Seretse Khama's party; I voted for it because my parents were Democrats' – although this person admitted to having later defected to voting for the opposition, when she was influenced by her children. Several of these participants pointed to individual local party activists who had influenced them:

> There was a man … whom we learned politics from him, he was from Shoshong. When elections were near he will come to Mosolotshane everyday putting loud speakers on his car that would be singing BDP songs. He made many people like and join BDP. We only hear about politics when elections were near, when they start campaigns. … In the old days there was not much of BNF. Many people joined BNF in 2000 era.

One group member had been exposed to and influenced by BNF leaders as a young man whilst working and living in the town of Mahalapye: 'I never voted BDP, I believed that its leaders are oppressors'. Another participant had also supported the opposition, having been influenced from an early age by a local BNF leader. Family was important to this participant also: 'During the 2024 elections, I voted for my niece as she was contesting under BDP'. Yet another participant told us that 'I never supported BDP, it wasn't in my blood'. She had been influenced by BNF leader Kenneth Koma in Mahalapye.

Part of the appeal of the BDP was that it had been led by Seretse Khama, whom everyone in the group revered. One man told us that

'Seretse Khama built Botswana politics from scratch and gave us independence; he was an honourable man with dignity'. Another concurred: 'Sir Seretse Khama built our Botswana; Botswana is what it is because of him; he was a man of peace'. Supporters of the opposition also concurred: 'Seretse Khama built our country, he was very clever and generous'; 'Seretse Khama was a brilliant man … He taught us that we are equal'. Most if not all of these focus group participants had formed strong attachments in early adulthood to either the BDP or BNF, and were influenced by a combination of national leaders (Seretse Khama, Kenneth Koma), local party leaders, and family.

Even strong attachments proved insufficient in 2024, however. As one woman put it, in '2024 it was clear that we [the BDP] will lose power because even old people who were well known Democrats joined the opposition'. The participants were uniformly critical of Masisi. Even the BDP supporters were critical: 'Masisi was behaving like a crazy person, he is the one who made BDP lose elections', whilst 'this time around President Boko was not using words that are disrespectful like he used to, he was very polite and well mannered'; and Masisi 'was always making noise, praising himself doing nothing, he forgot about voters [and] he was also full of lies fighting with Ian Khama'.

Urban Independence Generation

The participants in the urban Independence Generation focus group were very different. Four of the five participants had moved to Tlokweng as young adults. Only one had grown up in a household that was engaged politically and he was the only one of the five to have voted in elections prior to the 2010s, by which time the BNF was winning local elections. Most of the participants described their political engagement as a process of delayed self-realisation. They were aware that the BDP had been dominant locally prior to the 2000s but seem to have been detached from politics. Only in mid-life did their observation of economic factors (poverty and unemployment) lead to their political engagement. One participant, who had been employed by the state, had voted for the BDP until he lost his job in 2022. The others recall growing dissatisfaction with the BDP, and the growing appeal of opposition parties. One described the BDP as a 'dictatorship'. In striking contrast to the Mosolotshane group, only one of the five participants had anything to say about Seretse Khama. This one person recalled that 'wherever Sir Seretse Khama went there were always food hampers and blankets'.

The picture that emerges from this focus group is of men and women who, having migrated to Tlokweng, did not have the close

connections with family or influential local activists that seemed commonplace in Mosolotshane. Most had become strong and apparently loyal supporters of the BNF/UDC, but only after living in Tlokweng for some time. Both their political engagement (particularly including voting) and their attachment to the BNF/UDC began in mid- or even later life.

Rural Boom and Crisis Generations

The younger participants in the rural Boom and Crisis Generation focus groups also (like their elders) pointed to the role of family and of individual local activists in their political socialisation. One Crisis Generation participant stated: 'I grew up in a BDP household, that is why it was easy for me to become one of them'. Several participants in the Boom Generation group emphasised that 'most people were voting for a person, not a party'; one of these participants explained that she had voted for the local BNF candidate (Mogalakwe) as a 'person not party'. A Crisis Generation participant recalled that 'I liked Mr Mogalakwe and believed that no one can out-speak him, to me he was the best'. Another recalled liking the BDP because (during primary and general election campaigns) 'whenever they put on their speakers, we got out of our homes and run behind the cars, it was nice and interesting, I liked BDP so much and trusted it'.

Whilst most participants were influenced positively by their families, sometimes a person might react against them: 'My political views were influenced by Mr. Mogalakwe because my family were Democrats and I believed in the opposing words of Mr Mogalakwe. Every time I heard his speakers I would sneak out of the house to go and listen to him'.

Participants in both the Boom and the Crisis Generation groups included some people who had always supported the BDP, much like their elders in the Independent Generation. One explained: 'I started as a BDP member … I will die a BDP. … I was born in a family of BDP members and I just joined them. I liked BDP so much because I believed they built our country'. Others had supported the BDP previously but no longer did so: 'I was supporting BDP at first I just changed along the way'. Some participants, influenced by opposition party leaders, had never supported the BDP. One explained: 'I never supported BDP, I am a diehard of BNF'. Another said that 'BDP was like poison to me, I never liked it, its leaders were giving themselves a big steak and said we can't be the same, some have to eat bones'.

Some voiced strong criticisms of the BDP, saying that its leaders were disrespectful and just looking out for themselves. A participant in the Crisis Generation group told us that they had 'started as a BNF member

supporting Mr Mogalakwe' but then became a BDP supporter, because 'I learned that BDP has the interest of Batswana at heart [and] unlike other parties they were delivering what they promised'. Masisi was described as a 'clown' and 'unfit to rule the country'. He was accused of 'looting Botswana, he was only looking after himself and his relatives … he was the worst leader ever'. As a result, by 2024 'even the diehard [supporters] of the BDP were changing their language; the old people who used to be the pillars of the BDP were now saying bad things about it'. Despite this, the election result came as a surprise to some. One younger participant – who admitted that he was not particularly interested in politics – recalled that he thought that in 2024 it was 'just politics as usual; I was thinking that opposition does the talking and BDP wins elections'.

Like their elders, these residents – regardless of political affiliation – praised Seretse Khama. Even BNF loyalists said of him that he 'was a decent man with dignity who built our country from nothing to where it is today, he gave us independence, he was a hard worker with good politics; the country loved him' and that 'the whole country believed in him, I just wished he could have lived long that our country would be far'.

Family is important in villages like Mosolotshane, in part because of living arrangements. Most of the participants in the focus groups lived in extended, multigenerational households – i.e. grandparents, parents, and children – and in close proximity to other kin in the village, because of the lack of jobs and consequent poverty. Of the participants in the Boom Generation group, only one had ever been in long-term employment (as a soldier). Several were working on the Ipelegeng public works programme.

Urban Boom and Crisis Generations

The participants in the urban Boom and Crisis Generation groups were far more engaged with politics than the participants in the urban Independence Generation group. Almost all supported the BNF/UDC and denied ever having voted for the BDP.

Whilst some of the participants in the urban groups did mention family, they appeared to pay more attention to their experiences of (un)employment and were more likely to be influenced, also or primarily, by people outside of their families (including through churches or media). Some of the participants in the Boom Generation group – half of whom had been born outside Tlokweng – did point to early family influence, with most describing growing up in households where parents or grandparents voted or supported specific (and sometimes competing) parties. Some had grown up in BDP-supporting households but had later supported the BNF. Others had always been in BNF-supporting environments. But they do not

seem to have been immersed in family in the same way as their counterparts in Mosolotshane were. Nor do they point to individual party activists in the same way as participants in Mosolotshane do.

The urban Crisis Generation referred less to family and neighbours and more to church, social media, candidate campaigns, and media broadcasts as shaping their political awareness. They first voted in 2024. They were motivated by calls for change and a sense of personal responsibility, both influenced by social media. One participant educated in political science described voting as a civic duty, and explained that not voting was letting other people make decisions on her behalf. This attitude was noted in the earlier study conducted by the DRP (2022: 6). For others, unemployment and social issues were central motivations. Among the Boom Generation, motivations were shaped both by upbringing and by critical reflections on government performance. While family traditions introduced them to politics, frustration with unmet promises motivated them to seek change through voting.

Whilst there was general praise for Seretse Khama, the young participants admitted that their knowledge came mainly from school or textbooks. Masisi, by contrast, was dismissed as 'elitist' and 'corrupt'.

Discussion

The focus groups suggest that political preferences and loyalties in Botswana reflect generational experiences of socialisation in villages or towns. Preferences and loyalties have been reshaped through urbanisation. The rural participants spoke of how their immersion in family and their exposure to local activists had led them to attachments to the BDP or the BNF. For some, these attachments endured over time. For others, their attachment to the BDP has weakened over time, especially under President Masisi. These patterns appear to be common across rural generations. By contrast, the older urban participants, who had migrated to the city, seem less rooted in any familial or community context. They had slowly come around to supporting the opposition, but this support did not appear to have long or deep roots. The younger urban participants, however, did appear to have been socialised, in urban settings, into enduring attachment to the opposition parties. This socialisation appears to have been more diffuse, through diverse and typically less personal influences than familial influences.

The earlier generation of rural Batswana appear to have been socialised in the era of the revered Seretse Khama and the decades of BDP hegemony in Botswana. Among people of this generation who migrated to the city, the experience of urbanisation appears to have cut them off from

the ongoing socialisation experienced by their peers who remained in rural areas. For subsequent generations, whether in rural or urban areas, the erosion of BDP hegemony (capped by the controversial presidencies of Ian Khama and Mokgweetsi Masisi) appears to have made it easier for rural Batswana to 'defect' from the BDP and to have made it difficult for urban Batswana to remain BDP loyalists (although the focus groups shed no light on the anomalous 2019 elections).

Table 2: Knowledge of member of Parliament and district councillor, by location and generation, 2005

Knowledge	Independence Generation		Boom Generation	
	rural	urban	rural	urban
Correctly name member of Parliament	85%	75%	83%	64%
Correctly name district councillor	82%	73%	76%	52%

Other Afrobarometer data point to the significance of urbanisation. In the early rounds of Afrobarometer surveys, respondents were asked to name their member of Parliament (MP) and their District Councillor. As shown in Table 2, there are clear differences between urban and rural populations with respect to both their knowledge and the effects of age. More than 80 per cent of rural respondents could name their MP and about 80 per cent could name their councillor, with only a small difference between generations (and this could be an age effect rather than a generational effect). The proportion of urban respondents who could name their representatives was lower and was very much lower within the (younger) Boom Generation. (The Crisis Generation had not reached adulthood at the time of the surveys that included these questions.) Rural respondents were also slightly more likely than urban respondents to have contacted their MP or their councillor. This suggests that political engagement differs between urban and rural areas. This suggests that the effects of living in a close community outweigh the effects of education: More educated, urban residents appear less knowledgeable than less educated rural residents. We cannot distinguish between generational and age effects here because these questions were not asked in more recent rounds of Afrobarometer.

Conclusion

This paper analyses data from Afrobarometer's ten surveys fielded from 1999 to 2024 to assess the significance of generational effects on voters in Botswana. We supplemented these survey data with insights from focus groups. Analysis of a single survey (or even several surveys fielded over a short period of time) can result in the effects of age being conflated with generational effects. If, at any particular time, older citizens hold different views from younger citizens, this might appear to be the effect of age. If so, then younger voters might change their views as they grow older. Analysing longitudinal data allows us to separate – perhaps incompletely – the effects of age from generational effects. Afrobarometer surveys do not constitute a panel study, in that each survey has its own unique sample of respondents. But we can trace the shifting attitudes of voters over time by examining the views of people in each generation as they grow older in successive surveys.

Afrobarometer data suggest that there are enduring generational differences in the underlying attitudes of Batswana to voting (i.e. turnout), to the BDP that governed Botswana until late 2024, and to successive presidents, all of whom came from the BDP. The Independence Generation, i.e. Batswana who were born before 1967, most of whom came of age in the first decades after Independence, have more positive views than later generations with respect to voting, the BDP, and successive presidents. They are also more trusting of the BDP and of presidents from the BDP. These attitudes are not unchanging: The Independence Generation's general loyalty to the BDP has eroded over time. But the gap between generations persists.

When it comes to attitudes towards the challenges facing Botswana and the performance of the government, however, the differences between successive generations have been modest or non-existent since 1999. We don't have data on the attitudes of the Independence Generation (or the Boom Generation) prior to 1999, so we cannot say when precisely the drift away from the BDP began. What we can say is that negative assessments of the government's performance in tackling the economic and other important problems facing the country are one likely cause of the declining attachment to the BDP among successive generations.

The qualitative data from focus groups in urban and rural areas broadly corroborate the picture drawn from survey data, and provide some additional insights. Participants in the rural groups were much more likely to have formed enduring attachments to the BDP through family influence. Some participants had formed early attachments to opposition parties or individuals due to the influence of individual leaders but in general the

opposition parties were viewed as lacking competitive credibility. The urban groups were both more disengaged from politics and more antagonistic to the BDP. This appears to be the product of the general political context in an urban area instead of the influence of family or key individuals. Seretse Khama was revered by all, but much more directly among older than younger and among rural than urban Batswana. By the 2020s, under Masisi, even former BDP partisans were reconsidering their loyalty and defecting to other parties. The qualitative focus group data conform with the quantitative longitudinal survey data in suggesting that there are both generational effects and changes over time within each generation, although the dynamics are different in urban and rural areas.

Acknowledgements

The focus groups in Mosolotshane and Tlokweng were conducted by Leaname Busang and Angela Joubert respectively, with funding from the University of Cape Town. Hangala Siachiwena provided helpful guidance in the preliminary stages of the research.

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Appendix: IEC Report on Voter Turnout

	1	2	3	4	5	6
National Election Year	**Number of eligible Voters**	**Registered Voters**	**% Of registered voters (2/1)**	**Number of Voters**	**% Voted (4/1)**	**% of (4/2)**
1965	202 800	188 950	93.0	140 858	69	75
1969	205 200	140 428	68.4	76 858	37	55
1974	244 200	205 016	84	64 011	26	31
1979	290 033	243 483	84	134 496	46	55
1984	420 400	293 571	70.4	227 756	54	78
1989	522 900	367 069	72.3	250 487	48	68
1994	634 920	370 173	58.30	283 375	45	77
1999	844 338	459 662	57.6	354 463	42	77
2004	957 540	552 849	57.8	421 272	44	76
2009	892 339	723 617	81.1	555 078	62	77
2014	1 267 719	824 073	65.0	698 409	55	85
2019	1593 350	925 478	58	777 943	49	84

Source: Democracy Research Project (2022: 17).