Rise of Gen Z Voters: Voter Turnout in Botswana's 2024 General Election

Batlang Seabo [*] ***and Bame R Gaonyadiwe*** [§]

Abstract

Botswana's 2024 general election resulted in the country's first-ever change of power from the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) to the opposition coalition Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC). The elections were also significant due to a considerably high voter turnout, despite a slight decline from the 2019 general election. Voter apathy and low voter turnout during elections have been pointed out as some of the weaknesses of Botswana's electoral democracy. Besides many other causes of voter apathy, a history of one-party dominance has been identified as contributing to voter apathy, as studies found that many people, especially young people, do not participate because of the domination of the BDP. As a result, some scholars concluded that the long-time ruling BDP dominated elections because of the support the party enjoyed from older generations. However, following the historic defeat of the BDP by the UDC, one might wonder if there are significant changes in the demographic composition of voters in the 2024 general election. Based on this premise, this paper analyses voter turnout in the 2024 general election. Using electoral data from the Independent Electoral Commission, the paper compares voter registration and turnout in the different age cohorts. Afrobarometer data and secondary sources are also relied upon to investigate the influence of three theoretical factors: party identification, rational choice, and sociological theories. This paper argues that there was a rise in young and first-time voters in the 2024 general election, and this cohort of voters influenced the election outcomes by voting for the UDC, as its message resonated with this cohort of voters. The findings of the paper hold significant implications for Batswana's voting behaviour, elections, and the future of Botswana's democracy.

Keywords: Botswana, voting behavior, voter turnout, Gen Z voters, elections

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Introduction

In October 2024, Botswana citizens went to the polls to vote in the country's thirteenth general election since Independence in 1966. The 2024 elections presented a tough test for the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP)'s electoral dominance, which had been waning due to several factors. The Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) opposition coalition's vigorous campaign, though late in the day, seemed to resonate with many voters, especially young people who, amid deteriorating economic conditions and rising unemployment levels, blamed the BDP for its failure to create job opportunities. Evidently, electoral competition was also heightened because of the return of former President Ian Khama from a self-imposed exile in South Africa. Fabricius (2024) argues that Khama's mission on his return was to oust his arch-rival, Mokgweetsi Masisi, from state power. Using the Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF), a party he championed in its formation after a fallout with Masisi, Khama strategically targeted the BDP in its base in the former Central District, by fielding candidates in some constituencies and campaigning for UDC candidates. The Botswana Congress Party (BCP), another key player in the electoral field and considered one of the fastest-growing opposition parties in Botswana, contested the 2024 elections independently from the UDC, having pulled out of the coalition in late 2023.

This effectively presented voters with a three-horse race, which pitted the BDP against UDC/BPF and BCP. Thus, based on these events, it was reasonable to expect unpredictable electoral outcomes. A hung parliament was more possible compared to previous polls. Nevertheless, in a historic turn of events, the UDC won 36 seats, thus ousting the BDP from power, which secured only 4 seats, while the BCP emerged as the main opposition with 15 seats. While political analysts and observers have begun to analyse the 2024 general election (Makgala 2024; Maundeni *et al*. 2025), emphasis is placed on what led to the electoral loss of the BDP, with very little attention given to voter turnout. This paper contributes to the discourse on Botswana's electoral democracy by analysing voter turnout in the historic 2024 general election.

Why Turnout Matters for Democracy

Voter turnout is important for the functioning of any democracy. Substantial academic literature on voter turnout posits that 'the vote is the bedrock upon which democracy rests, and democracy is unworkable and unthinkable without the vote' (Hajnal 2006: 2; see also Powell 1980; Jackman 1987). Kuenzi and Lambright (2007) opine that elections are at

the core of modern democracy, and low voter turnout rates might indicate that people do not see elections as central to political life.

However, the global trend shows declining rates of voter turnout (Franklin 2004; Wattenberg 2011). Declining levels of voter turnout have been recorded in European countries (Hadjar and Beck 2010) and in the US (Norris 2002; Dalton 2002; Franklin 2004). The worry is that low voter turnout decreases the legitimacy of the elected government and therefore lowers the degree of acceptance of governmental decisions (Hadjar and Beck 2010: 522). For Lijphart (1997), low voter turnout often translates into 'unequal participation', in which participation is systematically biased in favour of citizens of higher socio-economic status. What studies generally find is that low turnout is generally pronounced among younger voters (Franklin 2004; Dalton 2015; Wattenberg 2015). These studies conclude that inexperience with politics, lack of strong ties to political parties, and a general lack of a sense of civic duty are the main reasons young people do not turn out to vote. Similar findings have been observed in some developing countries, including in Africa (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019).

A study covering 173 countries, including some in sub-Saharan Africa, reveals a general decline in voter turnout rate, from 65.2 per cent recorded in 2008 to 55.5 per cent in 2023 (International IDEA 2024). In some African countries, such as Tunisia and Nigeria, low turnout was recorded in the 2023 elections (International IDEA 2024). Lynge and Coma (2022) studied 317 presidential elections in 40 African countries from 1960 to 2016 to examine the effect of economic downturns on voter turnout in Africa and found that, when there is economic prosperity, African voters are more likely to participate and vote.

Tambe and Kopacheva (2024) demonstrate that the relationship between age and political participation varies across countries and that the effect of age varies across different forms of political participation. They conclude that younger and older people are less likely to participate in institutionalised political activities such as voting, contacting, and collective action, when compared to middle-aged people. Across the African continent, people aged 45 and 68 are the most likely to vote, while younger people are the most likely to participate in protests. Generally, age is associated with participation in different political activities in Africa, which is similar to established democracies. Moreover, Tambe and Kopacheva (2024) reveal that there are no patterns of regional differences in political participation regarding age–political involvement across African regions. However, there is a difference in the effect of age on political participation when examining a country's political freedom, corruption level, government effectiveness, and electoral integrity. In

countries where political freedom levels are moderate, young people are more likely to protest, and better electoral integrity slightly increases voter turnout.

Macdonald *et al*. (2023) analyse youth political activities in Uganda's 2021 elections, where there were high expectations that the youthful Bobi Wine would significantly challenge the long-serving President Museveni and the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM). These predictions were made considering that youth are a large constituency, which has been disenfranchised and has faced limited economic, social, and political opportunities. However, it became evident that the NRM benefits from the historically rooted strategies and tactics that make it impossible for youth to mobilise as a strong political force. The NRM continues to leverage past structures, practices, and narratives, and further redesigns them to capture youth as a political constituency. The NRM regards youth as a 'special interest group', and ensures that youth benefit from political patronage and party-based handouts. Youths are mobilised through economic opportunities and are rewarded for their loyalty and their defection from other parties. The NRM further uses social media tactics to promote a narrative that links social order and prosperity to a culture of gerontocracy. Youth have always been expected to be obedient and respect the elders' vision, direction, and leadership, since the time of Obote and Amin. Similarly, under Museveni`s tutelage, this has not changed. The NRM is promoted as the only political party that can defend and protect the nation, whilst Museveni is perceived as the only leader who can ensure peace and economic development.

Macdonald *et al*. conclude that the Ugandan youth have previously faced racial and age-based barriers to social, economic, and political progression in both colonial and independent Uganda. During these two periods, the youth failed to mobilise as a collective. They remained the servants of elite transitions in power. Moreover, the manner in which political structures have been designed in Uganda hinders youth from mobilising and organising. Youth are systematically absorbed under the controlled national and regional divisions. With these structures, the youth are relegated to an interest group, which is greatly controlled and influenced by the ruling regime, its activities, and politics. Since the regime relies on political patronage, it has significantly depoliticised key activities such as party affiliation and voting, and young and underemployed people are more occupied with surviving their harsh economic realities than with party affiliation and voting. Generally, the ruling elites have perceived youth as a potential political constituency that the elites have both feared and valued. Consequently, the regimes have devised multifaceted

measures to control the youth, thereby hindering their political participation and mobilisation nationally (Macdonald *et al*. 2023).

Focusing on Morocco's 2021 elections, Ferrali *et al.* (2023) analyse the effects of low-cost online interventions in promoting youth to cast an informed vote in electoral authoritarian contexts. They assume that many youths do not vote because of the high cost associated with accessing general information on politics. The results reveal that using low-cost, scalable, online interventions can increase voter turnout among certain groups of youth, especially the conditional voters, who are most likely to change their views on voting. Informing them about the benefits associated with voting and providing relevant political information possibly increases their turnout.

Moreover, De Parades and Desrues (2021) claim that the Moroccan youth began to increasingly participate in politics in the 1990s due to social and economic challenges. The youth expressed their frustrations through numerous protests that garnered the attention of the monarch. Towards the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, political parties were encouraged to work towards the inclusion of subaltern groups. Therefore, the youth wings progressively campaigned for the inclusion of young people at the political party and national level. After many years of protests and social movements due to economic challenges and the exclusion of the youth in decision-making, the youth quota was adopted in 2011. However, De Parades and Desrues (2021) reveal that there is an emergence of young people as a new political identity in Africa. With a focus on Morocco, the authors show how young people can arrange, mobilise, and influence politics. They also have the potential to influence intra-party policies and to campaign for change in general political institutions.

According to Hofmeyr (2024), the government's failure to deliver electoral promises is the main reason for young South African's minimal participation in elections. Prolonged unemployment, which is a critical determinant of economic agency, aggravates disenchantment. Young South Africans, who constitute the majority of the electorate, face systemic exclusion from opportunities that could enable them to contribute to the country`s progress. Dissatisfaction with government performance on crucial issues, including job creation, and with the performance of elected representatives, causes low electoral participation among the youth. Similarly, Mattes (2011) examines generational political orientation towards democracy in South Africa. The assumption is that, compared to other generations, the 'born frees' have different economic and political experiences, and access to better education opportunities in the democratic South Africa, and would have a strong democratic culture to consolidate democracy. However, he argues that the 'born frees' are less democratic in

comparison to older generations. Like the older generations, most 'born frees' find themselves in the shackles of unemployment, poverty, inequality, and hopelessness. The young voters are still faced with societal problems, including escalating violent crime and HIV infections. Against this backdrop, the assumptions made about the political orientations of the 'born frees' might produce different expectations.

To substantiate Mattes' arguments, an analysis of the South African Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and Statistics South Africa data by Mbete (2024) reveals that South Africa's voter turnout has declined drastically over the last 10 years. Voter turnout has decreased from 73 per cent in 2014 to 66 per cent in 2019, to 58.6 per cent in 2024. Mbete (2024) argues that the voter roll is shrinking, and fewer eligible people are registering to vote, especially the younger cohorts, who register in smaller numbers compared to older cohorts. Furthermore, Mbete posits that the South African IEC data show a huge difference in voter turnout amongst the different age groups. Specifically, voter turnout for first-time voters (18–19 years) declined from 83 per cent in 2014 to 80 per cent in 2019, followed by a further decline to 45 per cent in 2024.

Mbete (2024), however, argues that, considering the realities of youth unemployment in South Africa, it will be difficult for many young people to achieve the traditional markers of adulthood associated with electoral participation. The statistics reveal that the unemployment rate is above 50 per cent among those aged 15–34, 60.8 per cent among the 15–24-year cohort, and 41.7 per cent for the 25–34-year group (Statistics South Africa 2024). A pre-election survey by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on voter apathy cites reasons for not intending to vote in 2024 to be 'poor government performance in addressing poverty, unemployment, and corruption' (HSRC 2023). Of those who give poor socio-economic conditions as their main reason for not planning to vote in 2024, 57 per cent had voted in one or more previous elections. They argue that their main concern is the lack of job opportunities, which implies that the problem of voter turnout cannot be separated from the predicament of unemployment and poverty.

Observers of Botswana's political system have also reached similar findings that younger people in Botswana generally do not participate in elections (Mpabanga 2000; Ntsabane and Ntau 2000; Sebudubudu and Osei-Hwedie 2005). Therefore, low turnout in elections has been a major concern in Botswana's democracy, as observed elsewhere in the world. Younger people are less likely to turn out to vote, compared to older people (Democracy Research Project 2022). The declining levels of electoral participation are, in part, a consequence of people being disengaged from

politics because of the dominance of one party for more than 40 years of democratic rule (Mfundisi 2006).

While Botswana's democracy is widely admired in the region, scholars point out weak opposition, a lagging civil society, and declining levels of electoral participation as major impediments to democratic progress (Molomo and Molefe 2006). Substantial literature on Botswana's party system frequently cited the fragmentation of opposition parties as one of the reasons for the endurance of the BDP in government, apart from other obvious factors such as the incumbency advantage and the relatively good performance by BDP governments over the years (Osei-Hwedie 2001; Selolwane 2002; Maundeni and Seabo 2013; Good 2016). However, voter turnout is rarely studied, and few existing works primarily focus on general voter apathy (see Democracy Research Project 2002, 2022) and studies do not specifically analyse voter turnout to understand electoral results following elections. This paper contributes to the literature on voter turnout in Botswana by analysing the 2024 electoral results. The paper draws from the IEC reports, newspaper reports, and Afrobarometer data to analyse voter turnout in the 2024 general election. We posit that there was a rise in younger voters and first-time voters whose vote decisions may have been shaped by performance assessments. The paper is structured into five sections. The section that follows briefly discusses the various theoretical debates on the determinants of voter turnout. The paper then proceeds to review the literature on voter turnout in Botswana, and focuses on explanations for declining turnout over the years. The third section presents electoral data that summarise voter registration and turnout over the last decade. The paper examines voter turnout in the 2024 general election in the fourth section, and concludes with a reflection on the theoretical implications of the results and future lessons for Botswana's democracy.

Theoretical Explanations of Voter Turnout

The voting literature offers several reasons that motivate people to turn out to vote during elections. Some studies emphasise the important role of mobilisation agencies such as political parties in voter turnout (Powell 1980; Jackman 1987; Norris 2002; Beck *et al*. 2002; Franklin 2004). Dalton (2002) argues that voter turnout and participation in campaign activities are generally higher among individuals who identify strongly with a particular party. The logic is that people belong to various informal social networks with other like-minded people, and these social organisations shape their political choices (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019).

Botswana has developed a stable party system where political parties mobilise voters (Molomo and Molefe 2006; Lekorwe 2006). Thus, we would expect parties to play a mobilising role for voters, particularly for BDP voters due to the BDP's long history of incumbency and exploitation of state resources to lure voters (Masilo and Seabo 2015; Seabo and Nyehuis 2021). Media coverage also mobilises voters. Kuenzi and Lambright's (2007) study finds a positive relationship between media attention and voter turnout in that exposure of elections to the media increases voter turnout due to public attention to the issues, campaigns, and party manifestos.

Several studies cite age as an important predictor of voter turnout (Dalton 2002; Norris 2002; Franklin 2004; Wattenberg 2015). Franklin (2004: 16) argues that 'the factors most strongly associated with the likelihood that someone will vote are their age, their education, and the extent to which they are embedded in social structures'. However, most works conclude that young people do not turn out to vote as much as elderly people because of inexperience with politics (Franklin 2004; Wattenberg 2015; Dalton 2015; Schulz-Herzenberg 2019). Wattenberg (2015) attributes the decline in voter turnout among younger people to a lack of a sense of civic duty. Similar trends have been observed in sub-Saharan African countries (more generally, see Resnick and Casale 2011), including South Africa (see Mattes and Richmond 2015; Schulz-Herzenberg 2019) and Botswana (See Mpabanga 2000; Democracy Research Project 2002, 2022; Mfundisi 2006).

Rational choice theories emphasise the importance of economic and political performance as drivers of voter behaviour (Dalton 1984; Popkin 1991; Norris 2000). According to this literature, poor economic and political performance propels voters to the polls, and voters use their vote to remove a government that fails to deliver on its promises (Fiorina 1981). Fiorina (1981) argues that voters can remember the state of the economy in the last year and base their voting decisions on the government's performance. Killian *et al*. (2008) find that people are motivated to vote when they perceive that their personal financial situation is falling behind national trends. Botswana's recent economic downturn under the BDP-led government caused unemployment levels to increase to an estimated 28 per cent (Fabricius, 2024). Thus, we would expect young people, most of whom are affected by unemployment, to be influenced to turn out to vote.

In the context of Africa, some studies show that 'economic conditions may be far more important determinants of the vote in developing countries than in the West, at least when times are bad' (Pacek and Radcliff 1995: 756–757; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2009). Posner and Simon (2002) report that declining economic conditions reduce public

support for incumbent governments in Africa, but public dissatisfaction with the government is most often expressed through abstention rather than a vote for the opposition. In South Africa, evaluations of the government's handling of the most important problem facing the country, which an overwhelming 40 per cent list as unemployment/job creation, have a clear bearing on whether people will vote or not (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019: 149). We expect these dynamics to play out in the context of Botswana, to which we turn in the section below.

Overview of Voter Turnout in Botswana

Conventional studies have repeatedly shown low participation in politics and high voter apathy among the youth due to Tswana culture, low levels of mobilisation, and a lack of interest in politics (Somolekae 1989; Democracy Research Project 2002; Mpabanga 2000; Ntsabane and Ntau 2000; Mfundisi 2006). Moreover, insufficient voter education by the IEC, political parties, and youth NGOs is cited as a reason for the low youth turnout in elections (Mpabanga 2000; Mfundisi 2006). Considering age and turnout, Mfundisi (2006) shows that younger citizens, aged 18–20, were first allowed to vote during the 1999 elections, with expectations of a high turnout by that age group. However, only a few of them turned out to vote, which can be explained by decades of young people being alienated from political and social life. The 2024 electoral outcomes inspire us to examine whether there was a rise in the turnout of young and first-time voters whose vote decisions might have influenced the regime change. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2024) reports that Botswana's population consists relatively of young people, with approximately 60 per cent of the population below 35 years, 42 per cent under 25 years, and 18.7 per cent in the 15 to 24 age range.

Additionally, Botswana's economic situation leading up to the 2024 elections was marked by high levels of unemployment and corruption scandals, which may have contributed to increased participation in the electoral turnout. In this regard, we posit that the outcomes of the 2024 general election may reflect growing concerns about rising unemployment and poor economic performance, which led to younger people turning out to vote.

Trends in Voter Registration and Turnout

Before analysing turnout in 2024, we present registration data from the IEC over the last three elections to observe any patterns in the last 10 years. To examine how voters participated in previous elections, we present

proportions of self-reported voting in the last elections using Round 10 Afrobarometer data.

Table 1 shows the data from the 2014, 2019, and 2024 election years. We observe that an interest in voting has been rising over the last 10 years, with a significant increase in 2024. As argued above, amongst other factors, we postulate that the economic reasons, especially high levels of unemployment, might have motivated more people to register for the elections.

Table 1: Trends in voter turnout in Botswana: 2014–2024 Electoral data

Year	Eligible Voting Population (EVP)	Registered	% registered/EVP	Turnout	Voter Turnout (/Registered)	Voter Turnout (/EVP)
2014	1,334,023	825,582	62%	698,409	84.6%	52%
2019	1,592,350	925,478	58%	777,943	84%	49%
2024	1,700,000	1,038,275	61%	835,413	80%	49%

Source: IEC Reports (2014–2024).

Table 1 shows that the number of registered voters as a proportion of the eligible voting population modestly increased from 2019 to 2024. This is despite the drop recorded from 2014 to 2019. In 2014, the number of eligible voters was 1,334,023, but the IEC registered 825,582 voters. However, out of the 825,582 registered voters, 698,409 turned out to vote, representing an actual voter turnout of 84.6 per cent as a proportion of registered voters. Turnout as a proportion of eligible voters (1,334,023) was 52 per cent (IEC 2014). Therefore, almost half of the eligible voters did not participate in the elections.

In the 2019 elections, the number of eligible voters increased to 1,592,350, with the IEC registering a total of 925,478 voters. On election day, 777,943 of those registered cast their vote, representing an actual turnout of 84 per cent. However, total voter turnout among the eligible voting population was 49 per cent, lower than 52 per cent recorded in 2014. Thus, more than half (51%) of the eligible Batswana voters did not participate in the 2019 elections. A positive development was that young people (18–35) represented 41 per cent (Table 2) of the registered voters.

Again, in 2024, slightly above half of eligible voters also did not turn out to vote, which implies that apathy is still persistent. However, between the three election years, there was an overall 20 per cent increase in voter turnout.

Table 2: Voter registration by age in 2019

Age Group	Registered	% Registered
18–25	137,578	14.8 %
26–35	237,883	25.7 %
36–45	220,692	23.8%
46–55	137,984	15%
56–65	99,828	11%
66+	91,513	10 %
Total	925,478	100%

Source: IEC (2019) Election Report.

How does this compare to 2024? Table 3 shows voter registration by age in 2024. Observing voter registration as a proportion of the total number of registered voters, the 18–25 cohort recorded a modest decline of 1.5 per cent from 2019. However, comparing the actual number of registered voters, there was a modest increase from 2019 in the number of registered voters in the 18–25 age group, and a slight drop in the number of registered voters in the 26–35 age group. Nevertheless, the IEC reports that altogether youth voters (18–35) were 371,917 compared to 375,461 in 2019, which represents a percentage decrease of 1 per cent.

Table 3: Voter registration by age in 2024

Age Group	Registered	% Registered
18–25	139,698	13.5%
26–35	232,219	22.5%
36–45	257,861	25%
46–55	179,379	17%
56–65	117,123	11%
66+	109,963	11%
Total	1,036,243	100%

Source: IEC (2024) Report.

Turning to the proportion of self-reported voting in the recent elections, the Afrobarometer Round 10 data collected just before the 2024 elections show that slightly above 6 in 10 respondents say they voted in the 2019 elections (Table 4), while almost 3 in 10 reported not voting. About 1 in 10 were too young to vote.

Table 4: Voting in 2024 elections

Voting in the recent elections	Frequency	Percent
I did not vote	326	27%
Too young to vote	113	9%
I voted	757	63%
Total	1196	99%

Source: Afrobarometer Round 10 survey, 2024.

When we observe the proportion of younger people (18–35) who say they voted, four in ten report having voted in the last elections (Figure 1). This is consistent with the 41 per cent of the 18–35 registered voters in 2019 as reported by the IEC. Is this a mere coincidence or does it truly represent turnout among young people in the 2019 elections. But the crucial observation to make is that the proportion of self-reported voting has increased from 2019 to 2024 by 26 percentage points. Based on the registration numbers in the 18–25 age cohort in 2024, we can reasonably assume that this might be due to the entrance of new young voters from Generation Z.

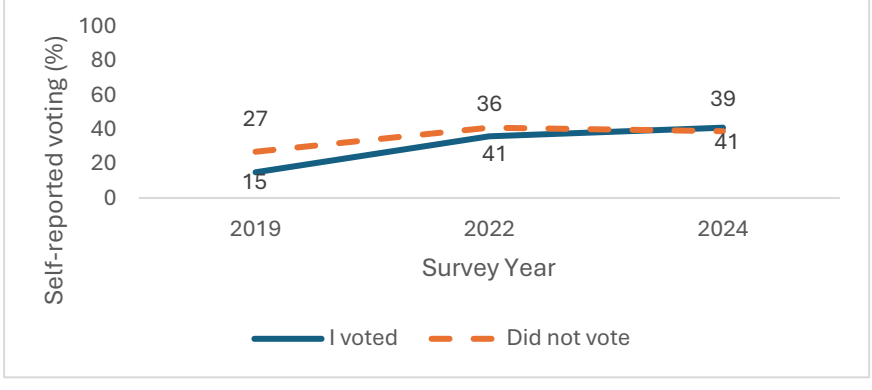

Figure 1: Self-reported voting by younger people (18–35) in the last elections
The 2022 and 2024 data refer to the 2019 elections.
Source: Afrobarometer Round 10 data time series.

As argued above, while voter apathy persists, there was a slight and promising increase in both the number of eligible voters and registered voters from 2019 to 2024. We have hypothesised that the 2024 elections reflected economic and other performance discontent among voters. We turn to analyse these dynamics using both Afrobarometer survey data and secondary data from newspaper reports. Afrobarometer does not ask

respondents if they would turn out to vote, but only measures intended vote choice. Therefore, we use the vote intention survey item as a proxy for turnout for our logistic regression models. But before we present the models, it is important to outline the context and factors underlying our key argument.

Voter Turnout in the 2024 Elections: Economic Discontent or Rise of Young Voters?

Several reasons underpin our expectation that there might have been an entrance of Gen Z voters in the 2024 general election. The 2024 elections might challenge the conventional position that young people do not participate in elections. The trend of the dominance of liberation parties in the region appears to be declining, and part of the reason is that young people are growing dissatisfied with independence parties for their failure to deliver jobs. According to Mooka and Eligon (2024), a spirited young population has, over the past year, disrupted old-guard liberation parties that had been relying on their credentials from the days of fighting colonialism, to stay in power.

This was evident in South Africa when the African National Congress was forced into a coalition government following a decreased popular vote for it in the 2024 elections (see *Al Jazeera* 2024). Gbadamosi (2024) writes that, across much of Africa, young people have campaigned to expel old-guard governments that failed to provide jobs for them, and Botswana's shocking election results have given many of those young Africans hope:

> The decimation of the B.D.P. is an indication of the discontent and disillusionment that permeates throughout the southern regions with former liberation movements that are divorced from the realities that confront their citizens,' said Rui Tyitende, a political science lecturer at the University of Namibia.

Similarly, the 2024 polls attracted a significant number of youthful voters who participated in electoral campaigns, and their votes swayed the outcomes. Botswana's youth population makes up more than 50 per cent of the country's eligible voting population (*Sunday Standard* 2024). Based on this, we posit that there was entry of first-time voters, a generation commonly referred to as Gen Z. Observers define Gen Z as a generation born between 1995 and 2012; they are known for their radical approach to matters (Lewanika 2024). Katz *et al*. (2021) describe Gen Z as a generation born since the mid-1990s, comprising the first generation never to know

the world without the internet, and the most diverse generation yet. Considered a group that speaks truth to power, Lewanika (2024) posits that, in the 2024 Botswana polls, they took centre stage and rallied the nation through a series of online campaigns. First-time voters, as they are called, took to social media to demonstrate their political activity by sharing pictures of their national identity and registration cards, and rallied fellow online voters to go to the polls and vote (Lewanika 2024).

According to Muia and Zane (2024), young people thronged the streets in jubilation, and one of them, 23-year-old student Mpho Mogorosi who represents the Gen Z generation, stated that

> I did not ever think I would witness this change in my life. … The BDP had stayed too long in power, and I am proud to be part of the people who removed them for a better Botswana.

One might conclude that perhaps political parties may have effectively mobilised young voters to vote. As argued above, we expected parties to continue playing the role of mobilising agents in elections. Be that as it may, Afrobarometer studies reveal that, in line with other age groups, young people do not generally trust political parties. Figure 2 shows Batswana's trust in the ruling BDP and the opposition parties by age groups.

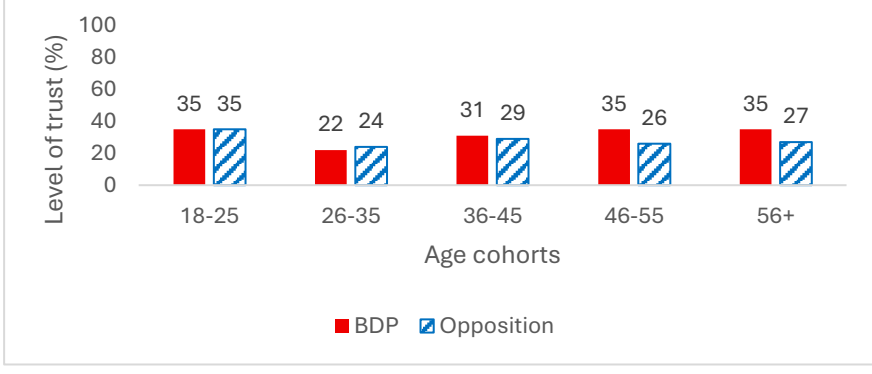

Figure **2: Trust in political parties by age group**
The respondents were asked: How much do you trust the ruling party, or opposition political parties, or haven't you heard enough to say?
Source: Afrobarometer round 10 survey data, 2024.

Generally, there was a lack of trust in both the ruling party and the opposition parties as the 2024 general election approached. Slightly above

three in ten of the youngest cohort aged 18–25 said they trust the ruling party a lot (Figure 2). In line with findings elsewhere, younger people show a lack of trust in political parties, even when asked about opposition parties. But in the 26–35 cohort, more young people trusted the opposition than young people trusted the ruling party. Perhaps this age group would have sympathised more with or preferred the opposition parties compared to the ruling party.

Based on this anecdotal evidence, it could be the case that young people do not have a strong attachment to parties. It is also reasonable to suggest that, of the youthful voters, the small proportion of Gen Z voters that participated in elections aligned more with the UDC due to the coalition party's relatively new existence. As argued above, compared to the BDP, the UDC's message could have resonated more with the younger voters. We turn to analyse factors underlying turnout among the electorate, but more especially among youthful voters.

What Propelled Younger Voters to the Polls?

The historic defeat of the BDP must be understood within the context of a poor-performing economy under the party's watch. In recent years, the plummeting diamond sales due to poor performance of the global diamond markets have negatively affected Botswana's economy and impacted the country's revenues. Benza (2024) posits that mounting economic grievances, particularly among young people, are reasons for the downfall of the BDP, which has governed the southern African state of around 2.5 million people since its independence from Britain in 1966. Moreover, there were many allegations of corruption under the BDP, especially under Masisi's administration. According to observers:

> The discovery of diamonds a half-century ago lifted Botswana, among the world's top producers of the stones, from poverty to economic and political stability. But its economic troubles in recent years have upset that narrative of an African success story – and many citizens blame the Botswana Democratic Party, accusing it of corruption and bad administration (Mooka and Eligon 2024).

The party's loss comes at a time when the unemployment rate is over 28 per cent, with most of the youth affected. Young people also shoulder a heavy burden of the country's inequality and poverty. Those challenges led to high engagement among a young population that is often passive when it comes to politics (Ford 2024; Nkani 2025). Gatsha (2024) writes that the 2024 high voter turnout is due to a combination of many

factors. The elections coincided with general dissatisfaction with the state of the country. This dissatisfaction was caused, amongst other reasons, by the leakage of many documents revealing the government`s wrongdoings and causing a general lack of trust in the leadership (Gatsha 2024). Table 5 depicts a general dissatisfaction across all cohorts with the government's efforts to address the unemployment problem. The discontent is felt by all cohorts, thereby showing the magnitude of the problem and its impacts on the people, regardless of age.

Table 5: Government performance in job creation, as rated by different age groups

Rating	18–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56 and above
Very badly	42%	58%	56%	55%	54%
Fairly badly	25%	20%	26%	28%	20%
Fairly well	30%	21%	16%	17%	20%
Very well	3%	0%	1%	0%	2%

The respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling 'Creating jobs', or haven't you heard enough to say?
Source: Afrobarometer Data Round 10, 2024.

Batswana gave negative evaluations on government's performance in creating jobs. Almost three-fifths of young people aged 26–35 say the government performed very badly in job creation. Just above four in ten of Gen Z (18–25) say the government performed very badly in job creation. When Botswana approached the 2024 elections, it was clear that the BDP had failed to address the problems of high unemployment, corruption by the elite, high inequality, and poverty.

Unemployment increased from 20 per cent in 2019 to 28 per cent in 2024. This meant that many people, especially the youth, were without jobs. Unsurprisingly, the Afrobarometer (2024) survey revealed that 53 per cent of Batswana say the government is doing 'fairly badly', while 24 per cent say 'very badly', at creating jobs. Furthermore, when asked about the most important problem facing the country that the government must address, most (43%) mentioned unemployment, and referred to the dire situation young people find themselves in.

Furthermore, *The Patriot* (2024) reports that social media provided a platform in which corruption and mismanagement were publicised, and reminded the citizens of the hardships they went through during the pandemic. Social media also provided an uncensored platform for voters to exchange information to overcome some of the challenges they experienced during elections. People were active, sharing tips on how to

deal with long voting queues and how not to split the opposition vote, and mobilising other people to vote. This kind of community engagement in elections was not expected (*The Patriot* 2024).

The Patriot (2024) states that the BDP manifesto did not appeal to young voters in the way the UDC and BCP manifestos did. The elections came at a time when young people were frustrated due to harsh economic realities, hence the youth resonated more with the opposition, who promised a better future, than with the BDP. According to *The Patriot* (2024), 'The youth, especially the unemployed graduates and incumbent tertiary students, were seen dominating the lines in different polling stations across the country, chanting the slogan of *are tlhopheng sentle* (let's vote wisely)'.

However, the use of social media for political mobilisation is not a new phenomenon in Botswana politics. It has grown over the years and improved people's access to information about political parties and candidates, thus aiding voters in making informed decisions. Masilo and Seabo (2015) argue that the increase in adoption of social media for political mobilisation has raised many young people's interest in politics. The use of platforms such as Facebook has revolutionised electoral campaigns, as both the candidates and political parties can interact with the electorate freely at any time. According to Masilo and Seabo (2015), this freedom has raised interest in politics among many subscribers, who actively engage in election debates and other issues related to politics. More importantly, social media became an important platform for political mobilisation, especially in the hotly contested 2014 elections, which shook the ruling BDP when the party recorded less than 50 per cent of the popular vote for the first time in history.

Similarly, the 2024 elections were dominated by social media, with private and public media, political parties, and candidates adopting the platform to reach out to the citizens. The live broadcast of Parliament, political rallies, debates, and other events raised people's interest in politics in general. Young people, who are the most active on social media and have access to timely information, engaged in the political debates, and aired their discomfort over the ruling BDP corruption scandals, which dominated the social media spaces. This has led young people to organise protests against corruption, mismanagement, and maladministration. They also engaged in hot topics in the pre-electoral cycle. Gatsha (2024) aptly states that

> Many felt disenfranchised and angry. Manipulation of the BDP's internal election processes raised concerns about possible rigging of the general election. The refusal of the Independent Electoral

Commission (IEC) to publish the voters' register electronically only added to distrust. Delays in publishing candidates' manifestos also left voters in the dark about who their candidates were and what policies they supported. Other worrying developments included the IEC's 'benchmarking' mission to Zimbabwe's electoral body, allegations of mismanagement, and questions about conflicts of interest in relation to large donations from wealthy people.

To understand what propelled younger voters to the polls, Table 6 reports the results of the logistic regression model for the vote choice of young voters (18–35). We treated vote choice for BDP against all other parties as the dependent variable, and a proxy for voter turnout, to observe what influenced younger voters to turn out to vote. The model tests for the influence of performance factors, corruption in the presidency, trust variables, lived poverty, and material well-being.

Table 6: Correlates of party choice for young voters (18–35)

DV: Vote Choice Opposition v BDP				
Variables	**B (SE)**	**Lower bound**	**Odds ratio**	**Upper bound**
Material well-being	-0.655(0.181) ***	0.364	0.519	0.741
President	0.986 (0.246) ***	1.654	2.681	4.345
Trust president	-0.476 (0.258)	0.375	0.621	1.030
Trust BDP	1.401(0.237) ***	2.552	4.058	6.451
Cases 239; R^2 = 0.416 (Cox and Snell), 0.557 (Nagelkerke); Model X^2 = 143.416; p < 0.00				

We report only those variables that showed statistically significant results. When we evaluate the model, it is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), and the pseudo-R-squared shows that the model reasonably explains variation in the dependent variable. Young people whose material well-being is worse were less likely to vote for the BDP than for opposition parties. However, approval of the president's performance and trust in the BDP correlated with votes for the BDP. By contrast, young voters who say they do not trust the president were less likely to vote for BDP than for opposition parties. However, trust in the president barely misses statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).

Thus, it appears that younger voters who expressed intention to vote if elections were held tomorrow were influenced by performance factors, their material well-being, and whether they trusted the president, BDP, and opposition parties. However, the influence of these factors on young people's intention to vote could also be affected by their relationship to one another, which begs further analysis that is beyond the scope of this paper. Did these factors matter even after controlling for sociological variables? Table 7 reports correlates of vote choice of young voters (18–35) when demographic variables were controlled for.

Table 7: Correlates of party choice for young voters (18–35) when controlling for demographics

DV: Vote Choice Opposition v BDP				
Variables	**B (SE)**	**Lower bound**	**Odds ratio**	**Upper bound**
Material well-being	-0.351 (0.148) *	0.526	0.704	0.941
President	0.893 (0.195) ***	1.665	2.442	3.581
Trust president	-0.451 (0.223) *	0.411	0.637	0.986
Trust BDP	1.292(0.209) ***	2.418	3.641	5.481
Trust Opposition	-0.395 (0.181) *	0.472	0.674	0.961
Education	-0.298 (0.118) *	0.712	0.988	1.372
Cases 270; R^2 = 0.363 (Cox and Snell), 0.487 (Nagelkerke); Model X^2 = 274.678; p < 0.001*, p < 0.05, ***p < 0.001.				

Controlling gender, urban-rural location, employment status, education, and partisanship, younger voters' decisions in 2024 were shaped by performance factors, their material well-being, and trust in political parties. Education is statistically significant, and younger voters with lower levels of education were less likely to say they would vote for the BDP. Perhaps being the most affected by unemployment, these voters punished the BDP and found hope in the UDC's electoral promises. For instance, Boko pledged to create up to 500,000 jobs in the next five years and increase the country's minimum wage to 4,000 pula, or about $300, up from $100, per month (Gbadamosi 2024). All these resonated with the young voters, many of whom are unemployed and enduring the economic hardships the most. As expected, partisanship does not appear to matter for younger voters.

The Mo Ibrahim report (2024) shows that youth unemployment has been a top concern in the country. Even though corruption does not appear

to have influenced young voters' decisions, the reality is that there was a continuous decay in governance. The country`s scores on the corruption-perceptions index kept declining over the years, which indicates a worrisome governance problem. In 2024, the scores declined from 61 recorded in 2019 to 57 (Transparency International 2025). The Afrobarometer data show that Batswana were generally concerned about increasing levels of corruption (Table 8).

Table 8: Opinions about changes in the level of corruption

Rating	18–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56 and above	Total
Increased a lot / Somewhat	119 44%	137 50%	105 48%	89 47%	108 43%	557 46%
Stayed the same	96 35%	78 29%	65 30%	56 30%	57 23%	352 29%
Decreased a lot / somewhat	38 14%	38 14%	26 11%	28 15%	36 14%	165 14%
Don't know	19 7%	20 7%	24 11%	15 8%	49 20%	126 11%

Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?
Source: Afrobarometer Data Round 10, 2024.

Most Batswana perceived corruption as problematic in the 2024 Afrobarometer survey. 46 per cent of Batswana believed that corruption has increased 'a lot or somewhat'. Across the different cohorts, there was a general perception that corruption has increased. Specifically, amongst the young cohorts, 44 per cent of those aged 18–25 and 50 per cent of those aged 26–35 perceived that corruption has increased 'a lot or somewhat'.

It is not surprising to see the performance of the president shaping the voting decisions of young people. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that young people may have blamed the president for corruption in government. According to Makgala (2024), President Masisi faced heavy criticism from the opposition MPs for influencing the awarding of government tenders, and private media exposed his corruption. Pheage (2022) adds that complaints were lodged against Masisi's interference and nepotism in awarding a 500-million-pula tender to his sister's company. Moreover, Piet (2023) states that the president's family fought in the courts of law over the tender company's ownership. The president's sisters and nephew battled over the company shares, with the latter accusing the former of using the Directorate of Intelligence and Security Director

General, Magosi, to coerce him out of the company. In the same vein, Gatsha (2024) writes that

> Before the election, there was a strong sense of frustration with the BDP, the longstanding ruling party, particularly over corruption linked to COVID-19, a flawed constitutional review process, and several proposed laws that were perceived to personally benefit the president and vice-president. Public discontent grew as the police met student protests with violence, and economic hardship continued with no reduction in government spending. The BDP's campaign was also marred by disinformation, which further fuelled mistrust.

Batswana's approval ratings of Masisi show that about a half (47%) of young people 'strongly disapprove' while more than a half (53%) 'disapprove' of the performance of the president (Table 9).

Table 9: Presidential performance by age

Approval rating	18–35	36–45	46–55	56 plus
Strongly disapprove	153 47%	59 18%	40 12%	76 23%
Disapprove	133 53%	51 21%	31 12%	35 14%
Approve	135 43%	59 19%	66 21%	55 17%
Strongly approve	46 40%	20 17%	13 12%	36 31%

Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the president has performed his job over the past 12 months?
Source: Afrobarometer Data Round 10, 2024.

It is not surprising to see strong disapproval ratings for former President Masisi. Boko (2022), the presidential candidate for UDC, bemoaned that Masisi abused his power to influence the government to allocate himself a portion of 4,947 hectares of Banyana Farms, despite public uproar against awarding the president the farm. Boko (2022) further lamented that Masisi leveraged the Covid-19 pandemic to enrich himself with government tenders awarded from his office. Moreover, multimillion-pula tenders were awarded to emerging fly-by-night companies supplying the most basic goods at exorbitant prices. According to Makgala (2024),

oversight institutions remained weak under Masisi's rule, hence corruption remained uncontrolled.

As the 2024 general election approached, the BDP was not appealing to the voters, while the opposition parties promised voters a better future. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2024) states that the UDC manifesto promised job creation, decent housing, an increased minimum wage, and increased pensions for the old, thus raising hopes for Batswana, and these were deciding factors for the 2024 general election. The ruling BDP seemed unconcerned about Batswana's dissatisfaction with their governance.

To demonstrate, a few months before elections, the BDP Minister for State President proposed the controversial President (Pensions and Retirement Benefits) (Amendment) Bill. This was an ill-conceived decision by the minister, considering the public dissatisfaction with the BDP's performance. The Amendment Bill suggested extending the presidential benefits to the children and spouses of the former presidents even after their demise. It further proposed that a dependent child of an individual who has held office should benefit, not just when the surviving spouse dies. Additionally, the Bill suggested increasing the number of vehicles of the former presidents to six, including one for their spouses (Selatlhwa 2024). The public rejected the Bill, and made plans to demonstrate against it. Opposition members, civil society, labour movement, academics, media, youth, and women's groups planned to join the demonstration to force the Executive to withdraw the Bill. As a result of the public pressure, the minister had to address the nation on national TV and withdraw the Bill (Kaelo 2024).

Therefore, it is clear that the failures of the BDP government made the party less attractive to all voters, especially young voters. Our regression models above may support our two hypotheses. Firstly, in the absence of a valid measure for turnout and of official turnout data from the IEC, our model shows that only a modest proportion of younger and first-time voters joined the many other frustrated voters to vote out the BDP. Secondly, the BDP's defeat resulted from the party's failures in government and the perceived poor performance of former President Masisi. These dynamics are interconnected for two reasons. Younger people with lower material well-being were more likely to vote for opposition parties. Additionally, those with lower levels of education (whom we assume are also more likely to be hardest hit by unemployment) were less likely to vote for BDP. Although we did not set out to test the influence of partisanship, we find that, when we control for partisanship, it matters less for younger voters than it matters for older voters.

Conclusion

Previously considered one of the major setbacks of Botswana's democracy, voter turnout in recent years may be gradually gaining traction, especially among young voters. Despite voter apathy still being prevalent among younger voters, the modest increase in the number of younger voters, especially those from Generation Z, influenced the outcomes of the 2024 general election, however modest their contribution was. However, we acknowledge that a combination of economic failures and the rise of younger voters in the country's 2024 elections culminated in the downfall of the BDP and an unprecedented change of government. This watershed moment in Botswana's political history is not peculiar in the region. The declining trend of dominant parties in the region may reflect failures of independence parties to deliver, and their disconnection with young voters, who are the most negatively affected by unemployment and poverty. Accordingly, young Africans who never lived under colonial rule want their leaders to provide jobs and basic services. This was promised in the UDC's electoral campaign, which seems to have attracted much support from young voters.

To conclude, the population of Botswana increasingly comprises younger people, and this holds implications for voter turnout and voter choice. As the paper shows, the influence of parties as mobilising agencies may become less important because young people have weak attachments to parties. In line with the global literature, young people respond to short-term factors such as the state of the economy, government performance, and the performance of leaders. The implication for Botswana's democracy is positive in the sense that increased participation in the political process improves the legitimacy of elected governments. Indeed, as Robert Dahl (1971) puts it, democracy is a celebration of an involved public. What is more, the historic 2024 elections may signal the consolidation of Botswana's democracy and provide a stark warning to politicians of voters' ability to use the power of their vote to remove poorly performing governments.

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