



# **Religion and Politics in Zimbabwe.**

**Report produced by the Research  
and Advocacy Unit (RAU)**

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## Background<sup>1</sup>

There is a common assumption that the Apostolic churches, the “Vapostori”, represent a “captured” constituency for ZANU-PF when it comes to elections.<sup>2</sup> This is undoubtedly a story with some truth to it, but rarely examined in any analytical fashion. The assumption probably derives some support from the notion that the Apostolic churches take their support from a largely rural population as well as from the poorer sections of Zimbabwean society. However, all of these are assumptions when it comes to politics and elections.

According to the Inter-Censal Demographic Survey (ICDS 2017), 84% of Zimbabweans are Christian. Of these, 34% over 15 years are reported to be Apostolic, 20% are Pentecostal and 16% are Protestant. Of the remaining 30%, 8% were Catholic, 5% followed traditional religion, and the remaining 17% were distributed through other small religions, with 10% stating no religious affiliation. Clearly Apostolics are the largest religious group and, if partisan affiliated, can have a significant effect on the outcome of an election.

**Table 1: Percent distribution of Apostolics versus other religions by Province,**  
[Source: Zimbabwe ICDS 2017]

Province	Apostolics (Nos.)	Other religions (Nos.)	Apostolic (Mean per Province)	Other religions (Mean per Province)
<b>Manicaland</b>	437827	612117	42%	58%
<b>Mashonaland Central</b>	389176	447762	46%	54%
<b>Mashonaland East</b>	317822	495834	39%	61%
<b>Mashonaland West</b>	329463	590824	36%	64%
<b>Matabeleland North</b>	146134	262470	36%	63%
<b>Matabeleland South</b>	181347	292145	38%	62%
<b>Midlands</b>	270853	614288	31%	69%
<b>Masvingo</b>	294336	576481	34%	66%
<b>Harare</b>	273210	1038986	21%	79%
<b>Bulawayo</b>	95192	406321	19%	81%
<b>Total:</b>	<b>2735360</b>	<b>5337227</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>66%</b>

Since we are concerned with the contribution of Apostolics and their possible participation in politics and elections, we re-classified the ICDS data into two groups: Apostolics and combined all other religions, including those that they stated “none”.

This first issue is tighten up the understanding of religious affiliation. According to the Afrobarometer Round 7 (2017), 12.2% of the respondents reported being affiliated to an Apostolic church, with is considerable lower than the ICDS estimate, and the rank orders of frequencies of Apostolics per Province between the two data sets are negatively related (see Table 2 over). This provides a problem in any comparison using the Afrobarometer data. It should be noted that the ICDS questionnaire offers only nine choices for religious affiliation whereas the Afrobarometer offers 23, with “Apostolic” as only one. Thus, it is possible that the ICDS tends to be over-inclusive about Apostolic affiliation in comparison with the

<sup>1</sup> RAU and MPOI gratefully acknowledge permission from the Afrobarometer for the use of the 2017 data base.

<sup>2</sup> *ED will win elections: Vapostori.* NewsDay. 24 May 2018. [<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/05/ed-will-win-elections-vapostori/>]

Afrobarometer. The Afrobarometer data also shows significantly more females than males reporting affiliation with an Apostolic church.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 2: Rank order of frequencies of Apostolics -Inter-Censal Demographics Survey (2017) compared with Afrobarometer Round 7 (2017)**

	ICDS	AB <sup>4</sup>
<b>Manicaland</b>	2	3
<b>Mashonaland Central</b>	1	3
<b>Mashonaland East</b>	3	10
<b>Mashonaland West</b>	5	5
<b>Matabeleland North</b>	5	6
<b>Matabeleland South</b>	4	6
<b>Midlands</b>	8	1
<b>Masvingo</b>	7	2
<b>Harare</b>	9	6
<b>Bulawayo</b>	10	6

This difference between the two data sets provides even greater problems when any extrapolation is made against the voting pattern in the 2018 elections. For example, on the ICDS data, it can be assumed that since there were 5,575,659 voters on the final BVR roll, this would mean that nearly 2 million (1,890,148) of these were “Apostolic”, and, if partisan to only one party, then a huge advantage for that party. If we take the lower, Afrobarometer, rate (12.2%), then the advantage is rather less, 680,230 “Apostolics”, but still a significant factor in a very close election.

Of course, this all speculative in the absence of knowing anything about voter preferences in relation to religion, and even more knowing actually how people voted. This latter cannot be derived from the publicly available information on the 2018 elections, but we can know something about political party affiliation and other aspects of political participation using the Afrobarometer data.

We decided to test these issues by examining the data from the Afrobarometer Round Seven (2017) survey. We used the Afrobarometer estimate for Apostolics in preference to the ICDS estimate as it seems more realistic.

## Methods

First we developed a code book of relevant questions.<sup>5</sup> All responses were re-coded as binary variables. A number of indexes of participation, with good reliability, were constructed as follows:<sup>6</sup>

- **Lived Poverty:** *how often have gone without the following: food, water, medical care, fuel for cooking, cash income;*<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Apostolics versus other religions:  $\chi^2=176.6$  ( $p=0.0001$ )

<sup>4</sup> There is a negative, non-significant correlation between the two data sets; Pearson’s  $r = -0.073$ .

<sup>5</sup> The code book is available on request.

<sup>6</sup> Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ : Lived Poverty (.89); Social Capital (.94); Political Fear (.97); and Political Trust (.996).

<sup>7</sup> *Lived Poverty* was included in order to check whether possible differences between rural and urban respondents might be confounded by poverty since Zimbabweans have suffered severe effects from the economic decline in the past decade or so.

- **Social Capital:** *Member of religious group; Member of voluntary association or community group; Attend a community meeting; Join others to raise an issue;*
- **Political Fear:** *How much fear political intimidation or violence; How often careful what you say; How often careful which organisations joined; How often careful how vote; Feared violence at political event; Feared violence during public protest;*
- **Political Trust:** *How much do you trust the following: president, parliament/national assembly, national electoral commission, elected local government council, ruling party, opposition political parties, police, army, courts of law, traditional leaders, and religious leaders;*
- **Political Affiliation:** *Are you close to a political party (Which party)? Vote for which party?*<sup>8</sup>

Since the main objective was to test the political affiliation of the non-formal churches (Apostolic and Evangelical), for the purposes of the analysis we combined all religions other than Evangelical or Apostolic together. This gave the following initial breakdown: Evangelical/Pentecostal (20%), Apostolic (12.2%), Other Churches (56.3%) and None (11.4%). We then combined all the other groups together, and when the data was cleaned gave a split of Apostolics (18%) and the remainder, Other Churches (82%).

There were a number of working hypotheses that we wished to test, some deriving from previous research on active citizenship and social capital.

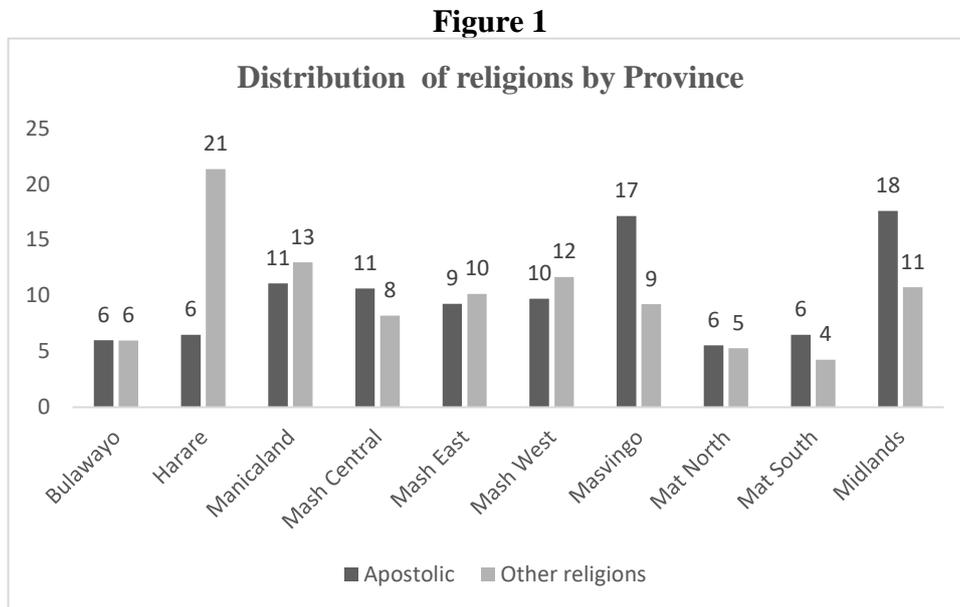
- Members of Apostolic churches will express stronger support for ZANU-PF than other political parties;
- Members of Apostolic churches will be predominantly rural, and hence show higher frequencies of social capital and political trust, and less political fear (RAU. 2018.(a); RAU. 2018 (b)).

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<sup>8</sup> Close to a political party: Scored as ZANU-PF, MDC-T, Other party, Reticent (Don't know, Inapplicable & Refused to answer); Vote for which party: Scores as ZANU-PF, MDC-T, Other party, Reticent (Don't know, wouldn't vote, refused to answer).

## Results

Noting the comment above about the differences between the ICDS and Abrobarometer data, we first looked at the distribution of Apostolics and other religions across the Provinces in Zimbabwe.



As can be seen, the highest prevalence of those declaring affiliation to an Apostolic church are in Masvingo and the Midlands. This seems at odds with common knowledge that sees a strong presence of Apostolics in the Mashonaland Provinces, but it has to be pointed out that this distribution is based on people's own responses about their affiliations. We cannot claim that this distribution is an accurate reflection of the actual prevalence and distribution of Apostolics nationally, but it does suffice for answering our questions about political participation.

As indicated above, we included the Lived Poverty Index as a potential check on economic differences between Apostolics and other religions as there is an anecdotal perception that the Apostolic churches attract both less economically-advantaged persons.

**Table 3**  
**Lived Poverty Index**

It was also evident from the Afrobarometer that, at least in this sample of Zimbabweans, there are more women in Apostolic churches than men, and, given the reputation in this religious group for polygamous marriage, it might be expected that there was greater poverty.

	Other religions [n=983]	Apostolic [n=216]
How often gone without food	16%	19%*
How often gone without water	25%*	24%
How often gone without medical care	17%*	16%
How often gone without cooking fuel	8%*	6%
How often gone without cash income	52%	61%*

\*significantly different on  $\chi^2$  ( $p=0.001$ )

As can be seen from Table 3, the only significant difference between the two groups is in Apostolics having less access to cash income<sup>9</sup>. But otherwise there are generally low frequencies reported for all the measures comprising the Lived Poverty Index, and no differences between Apostolics and other religions. This suggests that Apostolics are little different to other religions in economic well-being or not.

Are there then differences in the other measures of political participation between members of Apostolic churches and the other churches and religious groups?

**Table 4: Social Capital Index**

	<b>Other Religions</b> [n=983]	<b>Apostolic</b> [n=216]
Member of religious group	41%	41%*
Member of voluntary association or community group	12%	15%*
Attend a community meeting	43%	59%*
Join others to raise an issue	23%	26%*

\*significantly different on  $\chi^2$  ( $p=0.001$ )

As seen in Table 4, there are few differences between Apostolics and other religions on the Social Capital Index, but members of Apostolic churches are significantly more likely to attend community meetings than the others. This may mean that they are much more cohesive than other churches, but may also be an artifact of many Apostolics being rural residents where rural residents are more frequently compelled by culture or coercion to attend meetings.

If coercion is a factor in Social Capital, then we might expect Apostolics to be little different to other religions in having political fear. Zimbabwe has had high frequencies of political violence, particularly (but not exclusively) in rural areas, and especially during elections.

Apart from not fearing violence during public protest or at public events, both groups reports appreciable levels of fear. On every measure Apostolics are significantly less fearful than others, but they are nonetheless fearful about politics. This does not suggest that the much-quoted support for ZANU-PF and the equally frequently quoted courting of the Apostolics leaves the members of the Apostolic churches with either a sense of safety or immunity.

**Table 5: Political Fear Index**

	<b>Other religions</b> [n=983]	<b>Apostolic</b> [n=216]
Join others to raise an issue	57	58*
How often careful what you say	82*	75
How often careful which organisations joined	69*	63
How often careful how vote	64*	61
Feared violence at political event	32*	30
Feared violence during public protest	26*	20

\*significantly different on  $\chi^2$  ( $p=0.001$ )

On this data, members of Apostolic churches have significantly less Political Fear than the members of other churches, which may suggest that their supposed affiliation to ZANU-PF provides them with a degree of immunity from intimidation or violence.

<sup>9</sup> Apostolic versus other religions:  $\chi^2=23.8$  ( $p=0.001$ )

We also examined potential differences due to Political Trust. Political trust has not been shown to be factor in Western studies to lie behind more active political participation (van Deth.2001), but previous Zimbabwean studies have shown consistent differences between rural and urban groups in the degree of trust they place in key political figures and agencies (RAU. 2018 (a); RAU. 2018 9b)). Given the mooted relationship between Apostolics and residence in rural areas, we expected to find that Apostolics evinced greater Political Trust than other religions.

**Table 6: Political Trust Index**

	<b>Other religions</b> [n=983]	<b>Apostolic</b> [n=216]
President	41%	50%*
Parliament	25%	37%*
National electoral commission	24%	31%*
Local government council	23%	32%*
Ruling party	32%	42%*
Opposition political parties	8%	6%*
Police	23%	35%*
Army	34%	43%*
Courts	28%	47%*
Traditional leaders	40%	51%*
Religious leaders	41%	45%*

\*significantly different on  $\chi^2$  ( $p=0.001$ )

In general the levels of trust are not very high, with only in trust the president (in February 2017) and traditional leaders reaching around 50%. However, members of Apostolic churches have significantly higher trust in every single official or organisation than members of other churches, and, furthermore, have much lower trust in opposition political parties. When seen in the context of high levels of political fear by Apostolics (and other churches), the low trust levels seem obvious.

Given this lack of trust in opposition political parties, it is not surprising that Apostolics are the stronger supporters of ZANU-PF than members of other churches. Other religions show greater support for the MDC-T and other political parties than the Apostolics, but there are also very much higher frequencies of the “reticent” – those answering as *inapplicable* or *refused to answer* in the members of other churches, but the Apostolic members also have reasonably high frequencies of being “reticent”.

**Table 7: Political Affiliation**

	<b>Other religions</b> [n=983]	<b>Apostolic</b> [n=216]
Close to MDC-T	14%*	6%
Close to ZANU-PF	32%	46%*
Close to other party	3%*	1%
Reticent about closeness to party	51%*	47%
Vote for MDC-T	16%	12%
Vote for ZANU-PF	35%	53%*
Vote for other party	6%*	3%
Reticent about voting	42%*	32%

\*significantly different on  $\chi^2$  ( $p=0.001$ )

Taking the rates of “reticence” in the context of high levels of political fear and relatively low levels of political trust, it does not seem that in can be axiomatically assumed that members of Apostolic churches can be comprehensively assumed to be in the packet of ZANU-PF. Those that express open political affiliation do not support opposition political parties, but very high numbers are “reticent”, and it is not evident where their support would have been placed (or where it was placed) in the 2018 elections).

These were all interesting findings at the level of the frequency data and were all statistically significant differences, but we decided to test the hypotheses more empirically.

### *Hypothesis testing*

The first test was to use “Apostolic” as the independent variable, tested against a variety of dependent variables. This was in line with our general hypothesis.

**Table 8: Do Apostolics have stronger affiliation to ZANU-PF than other religions?**

	<b>Apostolic</b> <i>[n=147]</i>	<b>Other religions</b> <i>[n=1053]</i>	<b>Df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig</b> <b>(2-tailed)</b>
Lived Poverty	.342	-.178	1198	-.237	ns
Social Capital	-.178	.778	1198	3.534	0.0000
Political Fear	.778	-.070	1198	-1.212	ns
Political Trust	-.070	.111	1198	2.619	0.0090
Close to MDC-T	.111	-.018	1198	-2.423	0.0160
Close to ZANU-PF	-.018	-.048	1198	2.651	0.0080
Reticent about closeness	-.048	.139	1198	-.415	ns
Vote for MDC-T	.14	-.06	1198	-1.487	ns
Vote for ZANU-PF	-.06	.00	1198	3.255	0.0010
Reticent about voting	.00	.00	1198	-1.330	ns

According to the common assumption and the frequency data, the Apostolic group should show affiliation to the ruling party, ZANU-PF, which they do, both as being close to the party and voting for ZANU-PF.

However, given that previous research indicates that all measures – Social Capital, Political Trust and Political Fear – are differentially distributed between rural and urban areas in Zimbabwe (refs here), this may have been an artefact of “residence”. It is probable that rural residence is a confounding factor in many measures of political participation and active citizenship, and thus the relatively high frequency of “reticents” amongst even the Apostolics (Table 7) may be masking this factor. It was also evident, at least on this sample, that Apostolics were fairly evenly distributed across the Provinces in Zimbabwe (Figure 1), and the only significantly high frequencies of Apostolics were found in Masvingo and the Midlands.

Thus, when residence (rural or urban) is used as the independent variable, political participation by religious groups is seen to be more a result of rural residence than being associated with any single religion (Table 9 over).

**Table 9: Is rural residence is the determining factor in religious and political affiliation?**

	Urban [n=448]	Rural [n=752]	df	<i>t</i>	Sig (2- tailed)
Lived Poverty	1.27	1.16	1198	1.58	ns
Social Capital	0.88	1.44	1198	-8.66	0.0000
Political Fear	3.29	2.36	1198	9.66	0.0000
Political Trust	2.92	4.07	1198	-5.771	0.0000
Close to MDC-T	0.13	0.12	1198	.568	ns
Close to ZANU-PF	0.18	0.45	1198	-9.855	0.0000
Reticent about closeness	0.68	0.40	1198	9.844	0.0000
Vote for MDC-T	0.18	0.14	1198	1.876	0.0610
Vote for ZANU-PF	0.24	0.47	1198	-8.065	0.0000
Reticent about voting	0.51	0.34	1198	5.782	0.0000
Apostolic	0.07	0.15	1198	-4.378	0.0000
Other religions	0.93	0.85	1198	4.378	0.0000

As seen in Table 9, the association between rural residence and affiliation to an Apostolic church remains, but rural residence affects all religions equally. It is rural residence itself that is key to determining whether citizens have greater social capital, less political fear, greater political trust, and being less reticent to disclose whether they have a political affiliation. On these findings, ZANU-PF could have expected support from members of Apostolic churches in the 2018 elections, with the caveat that a significant number of Apostolic church members do not declare their affiliation, and may well have voted for opposition political parties.

We also looked at Gender as an independent variable, and there were no major differences between men and women. However, women were significantly more likely to be close to the MDC-T and to vote for the same, but also to significantly more likely to reticent about their closeness to a political party or voting for a political party. Men were more likely to belong to religions other than an Apostolic church, and there were no differences due to gender on any of the indices – Lived Poverty, Social Capital, Political Fear or Political Trust.

## Conclusions

There were two broad research questions guiding this study:

- Members of Apostolic churches will express stronger support for ZANU-PF than other political parties;
- Members of Apostolic churches will be predominantly rural, and hence show higher frequencies of social capital and political trust, and less political fear (RAU. 2018 (a); RAU. 2018 (b)).

The first question is only partially answered. Members of Apostolic churches do have stronger support for ZANU-PF than other churches, and, as seen in all the frequency data, are a very distinct group from all other religions. They have significantly greater Social Capital, less Political Fear, and greater Political Trust. However, all the indices suggesting that Apostolics are wholly distinct are confounded by another variable, Rural Residence. As seen in Table 9, it

is being a rural resident that distinguishes this group from urban residents on every single index, except for Lived Poverty and closeness to the MDC-T. This finding reinforces previous research and many other Zimbabwean studies that show the differentiation in attitude and behaviour between rural and urban citizens.

When it comes to political participation such as voting, Apostolics are merely a sub-group of the general rural population, and it is this population that demonstrates affiliation for ZANU-PF rather than the MDC-T. At least this was so in February 2017, but it also seems fair to conclude (see Table 7) that not all members of the Apostolic churches will support or vote for ZANU-PF: 47% of the Apostolic sub-group in this sample were reticent about stating whether they were close to a political party, and 32% were similarly reticent about stating which political party they would vote for.

The “rural factor” is once again implicated as a major determinant in political participation, but we are really no closer to understanding this in any detailed manner. Religion was a potentially interesting avenue to explore, but, apart from showing that one particular religion, much commented upon, does have partisan affiliation, this has merely shown the existence of a politically partisan sub-group. It is not overwhelmingly partisan, however, and the significant numbers within this group that are cautious about expressing political affiliation suggests that Apostolics are more heterogeneous than we conventionally assume. And this seems both logical and sensible, and we should be cautious about stereotyping groups.

Nonetheless, members of Apostolic churches are clearly a distinct groups from other religions, and something about their cohesion or practices leads them to have greater Social Capital, less Political Fear and much greater Political Trust. If we weren't so concerned about how they might vote, we might be inclined to see members of Apostolic churches as model citizens!

## **References:**

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