



The Main Barriers to Youth Political Participation in Botswana

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ABSTRACT

Youth participation in politics and elections should not only be limited to voting, they must be seen as potential leaders with the capability of contributing to the progress of society. This paper explores the main barriers to youth political participation in Botswana and uses a qualitative approach to assess the barriers youth face in politics. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from civil society organizations, political parties, academia, and government. The results reveal that young people find themselves in political parties dominated by elders, with fewer resources, exacerbated by high unemployment, blocking their meaningful political participation. The lack of civic education, political socialisation, societal attitude and mentality towards the youth further affects their behaviour towards politics. Moreover, youth are also part of the problem because of their perception of politics and failure to invest in their political careers to make a meaningful contribution.

Keywords: Botswana, Democracy, Elections, Political Participation, Youth.

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been noticeable efforts by governments globally to open the political space for youth to allow them to be part of decision-making at all levels of governance. In developing countries, youths face quite serious social and economic challenges. Unfortunately, they are not meaningfully included in policy decisions that are currently affecting them and will affect them in the future (Gyimah-Brempong & Kimenyi, 2013). The traditional African setup has always perceived the youth as subordinates, which is still the case in contemporary rural settings and impacts African youth's roles, expectations, problems, and potential. The youth are demographically a majority in Africa, though they remain marginalized in the modern and traditional governance systems (McMahon & Kalantaryan, 2020). The African Union (AU) recognizes the importance of young people in decision-making (African Union, 2006; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2012). The AU Youth Charter provides for the recognition and respect of the rights of youth in all spheres of life (African Union, 2006).

Botswana aspires to have an inclusive society where every segment of society has an equal chance to actively engage in the country's economic, social, cultural, and political development by 2036 (Government of Botswana, 2016). However, the country is still lagging as vulnerable groups, including women, people with Disabilities (PWD) and the youth, remain poorly represented in decision-making structures. Botswana has not yet adopted the international legal and regulatory frameworks that promote the participation of these vulnerable groups. To be specific, Botswana has not yet signed and ratified the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and the African Youth Charter, which are instrumental in promoting the participation of all societal groups in the political process (BOCONGO, 2021).

Youth in most African countries remain excluded from the political system, although the development of modern democratic societies relies on the meaningful participation of all segments of society (Turashvili, 2016). Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018) states that youth participation in national parliaments is crucial as it contributes to a more

representative democracy. Though there has been meaningful progress in recognising youth as contributors to societal development, the political space in Africa remains very narrow for the youth. Kitanova (2020) highlights political, socioeconomic and cultural content as the main factors affecting youth engagement in politics and governance in many parts of the world. Youth in Botswana remain underrepresented in politics and the electoral process, even though the electoral law does not discriminate against them. Candidacy for electoral competition is allowed at 18 years and above as stipulated by the Government of Botswana (2022). However, youth contestation for political positions and their presence in the legislative body is low.

Table 1: Interparliamentary Union Data showing Age Distribution in Botswana Parliament for the years 2014 – 2019 and 2019 – 2024

Age Group	Number of MPs in 2014	Number of MPs in 2019
21 - 30	1	0
30 - 40	13	5
41 - 45	10	5
46 - 50	8	30
51 - 60	26	20
61 - 70	6	3
Total	63	63

Source: (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024)

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024) defines young parliamentarians as individuals under 45 in its efforts to be inclusive. This is to recognise the differences in the definition of `youth` across countries and international organisations from which the data is derived. Further, to cater for national variations of defining `youth` and `eligibility ages` for parliamentarians, the IPU reports on youth visibility in parliaments using the three age categories of 30 and under, 40 and under and 45 and under.

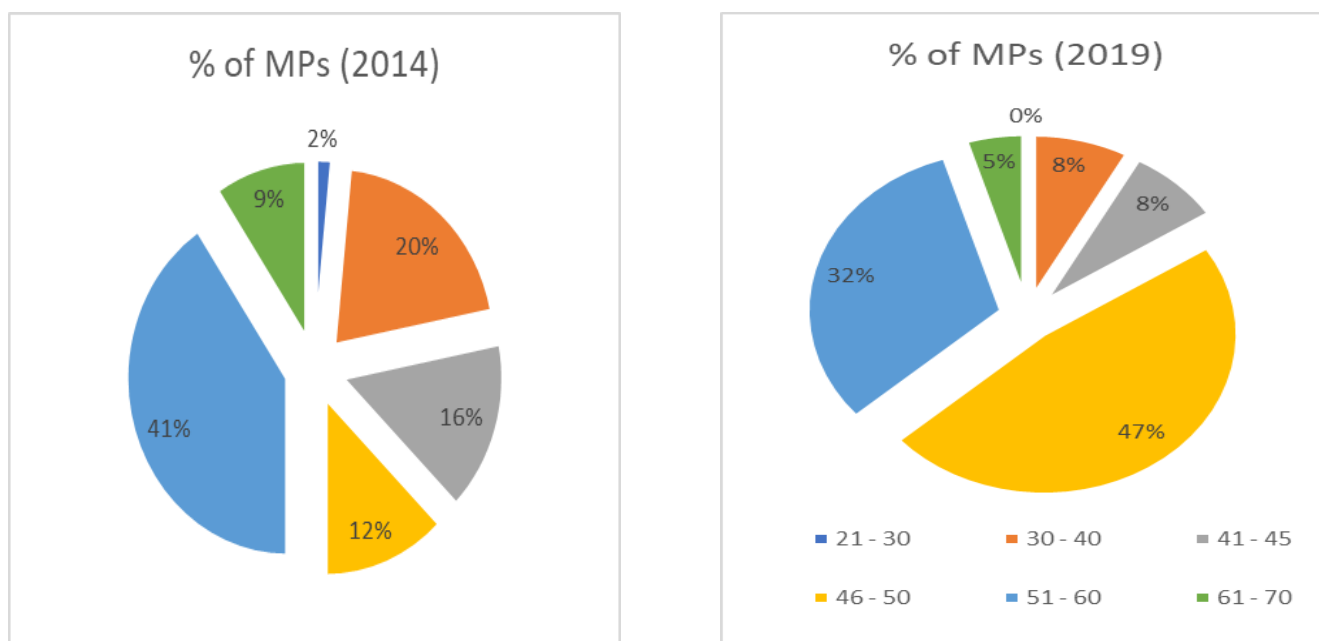


Figure 1: Pie Charts Visualising the Age Distribution in Botswana Parliament (2014 – 2024)

Source: Researcher`s Construct from Inter-Parliamentary Union Data (2024)

The pie charts above reveal that only 2% of the members of parliament were aged 21 – 30 in 2014, while there was no member in that category in 2019. In 2014, 20 % of the parliamentarians were aged 30 – 40 and only 8 % in 2019. Furthermore, 16 % of parliamentarians were aged 41 – 45 in 2014 and 8 % in 2019. The largest section of the pie charts indicates that most members of parliament were aged 51 – 60 in 2014 and 46 – 50 in 2019. However, this study uses Botswana's definition of youth of 18 – 35, and according to the IPU classification, the researcher considers those aged 40 and under and 30 and under. Against this backdrop, only 22 % of parliament members were young in 2014, drastically dropping in 2019 when only 8 % were considered young. The researcher argues that the number of young members of parliament under Botswana's definition of youth is significantly lower than the one provided by the IPU because it includes those aged 36 + years. Hence, those aged between 18 and 35 may be very low in numbers provided by the IPU.

There is currently no information from the IPU on the age distribution of the new members of parliament of the just-ended 2024 general elections. However, one of the leading radio stations revealed the new Members of Parliament's profiles in their broadcast of `Know Your MPs`. The information shows that only two members of parliament are aged between 18 and 35 out of the 67 new members (Gabz FM, 2024). The youngest member is the specially elected member of parliament (SEMP) and the country's youngest minister of Youth and Gender Affairs at 26 years, Ms Lesego Chombo (Mathala, 2024; Mashamaite, 2024).

Other African countries also face the problem of youth participation in politics, elections and governance. Unlike Botswana, they have established different frameworks to promote the inclusion of young people. Ethiopia's legislative house comprises 51.2 MPs aged 40 and under, while those aged 45 and under comprise 71.1 %. Further, in 2018, Ethiopia elected the youngest head of state in Africa. Other countries have reserved seats for young members; Uganda has the smallest share of 1.2 %, while Morocco has the largest of 7.6 %. In some countries, there are legislated candidates and voluntary party quotas giving youth a proportion of about 20 to 50 %, and in Egypt, that proportion depends on the size of the electoral districts. Moreover, there is an element of gender equality in some countries, such as Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda, which provides that a woman must occupy at least one of the seats reserved for the youth. Morocco had different quotas for both women and youth under 40, with each group occupying 30 seats. This law was reformed in 2016 to allow for the alternation of women and men candidates on the youth lists (Inter - Parliamentary Union, 2023).

The barriers to meaningful youth participation in politics and elections in Botswana remain understudied. A few outdated studies on youth participation focused mainly on youth voter apathy. Ntsabane & Ntau (2000), in `Youth and Electoral Participation in Botswana`, conclude that Tswana culture limits youth participation in public affairs as it remains dominant in the main socialising agents such as the society. Furthermore, Mfundisi (2006) in `Civic Education and Voting Patterns in Botswana` concludes lack of civic education in the school curriculum leads to unpatriotic and undemocratic youth who see no purpose in voting. These studies have explored youth participation from a narrow angle, leaving out another important aspect of youth as competitors or electorates in the political process, which this study mainly focuses on.

1.1 Defining Youth

This concept is a social construct in which meaning and comprehension vary from society to society. Diverse cultures and societies recognise a transition period from childhood to adulthood as youth or adolescence (Ginsberg et al, 2014). The sociocultural conception regards youth as when one acquires attitudes, values, and other skills that will help them become responsible adults. Today, age is usually a common and main criterion for defining youth (Cammaerts et.al, 2015). The UN defines youth as individuals between 15 and 24 years, UNDP (2014), while the African Youth Charter (2006) defines youth as individuals aged between 15 and 35. However, the Botswana National Youth Policy of 2010 defines youth as a person between 15 and 35 (Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture, 2010). This study defines youth as individuals aged 18 to 35 who, by Botswana laws, have full political rights to freely participate in the electoral processes.

1.2 Defining Political Participation

According to Isa & Yucel (2020), Milbrath developed a broad list defining political participation in 1965. The list includes: a. holding public or party office, b. being a candidate for office, c. attending a caucus or a strategy meeting, d. becoming an active member of a political party, e. contributing time to a political campaign, f. attending a political meeting or rally, g. making a monetary contribution to a party or candidate, h. contacting a public official or a political leader, i. wearing a button or putting a sticker on the car, j. attempting to talk another into voting a certain way, and k. initiating a political discussion. Ruedin (2007) classified the list into 3 categories. The last four stages were labelled as spectator actions, the middle three as transitional actions and the first three as gladiator actions.

The above list disqualifies the main tendency of limiting political participation to voting. Chisholm & Kovacheva (2002) argue that political participation entails involvement in institutional politics (elections, campaigns and membership), protest activities (demonstrations and new social movements) and civic engagement (associative life, community participation, and voluntary work). Moreover, van Deth (2016) adds to the basic list by Milbrath, 1965, by stating that: (1) political participation must be an action rather than simple interest, (2) this action must be voluntary rather than pressure-induced, (3) this voluntary action must be performed by non-professionals rather than paid professionals, (4) the non-professional voluntary action should never lose the adjective 'political', (5) it must be targeted at the sphere of government, state, and politics, (6) it must be aimed at solving collective or community problems, (7) it must remain within a political context or, (8) it must be used to express political aims and intentions.

This study mainly focuses on the conventional forms of participation, where the youth are involved in institutional politics as a yardstick for youth political participation in Botswana. The study adopts the basic list of political participation by Milbrath (1965), focusing on Ruedin's (2007) gladiators' actions, which include holding public or party office, being a candidate for office, and attending a caucus or a strategy meeting. This study is interested in youth political participation at the forefront of political institutions.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

2.1 Life Cycle Effects Theory

The life cycle theory has been adopted in political science to explain the social, psychological, and physical changes that occur as individuals grow up. In the 1950s, Franco Modigliani and Richard Brumberg advanced this theory theoretically and empirically (Erkulwater, 2012). The theory postulates that life stages and their impacts, changes in income, education, residence, family status and other events that young people go through, are more relevant in explaining the concern of their political participation. Hence, this study applies this theory to explain the youth's behaviour and choices towards political participation. According to Norris (2003), life stages have an enduring effect on the youth's attitudes toward politics. Youthful individuals are less active in politics as they are still unsettled and preoccupied with becoming adults (Norris, 2003).

The effects of the lifecycle are that as young people become older, they gain a lot of experience in elections and the political process. Once they complete their studies and become stable in life, they become more integrated into the community, thus raising their interest in politics (Braungart & Braungart, 1986). When youth pass through the challenging life stages, they are most likely to participate as they now have financial resources, have acquired education, and have more time and interest in politics. As they grow, they gain skills, knowledge, resources and interest in political affairs. Starting up families brings stability, societal integration, interests in social needs such as education, and a safe environment for their families. Moreover, getting a job broadens their network and access to mobilization organizations. Hence, they have economic security, experience and political knowledge, making it easier and more meaningful to participate in politics (Erkulwater, 2012). The theory is pertinent to this study as it explains the low participation of youth in politics and the electoral process.

2.2 Generational effects theory

The theory of generations is traced back to 1928 in the writings of Karl Mannheim, in which he argued that the socio-historical environment extensively influences individuals. The remarkable events that a group of individuals engage in

as they grow, and their shared experiences further have an impact on their lives (Stocker, 2014). In this context, 'generation' or 'cohort' refers to a group that is different in any number of respects by being born around the same time and having gone through a specific set of social, economic, technological, and political circumstances at a formative period of their life. People in their formative years tend to develop and crystallise basic beliefs, attitudes, identities, habits, and other predispositions. Political socialisation researchers refer to this period as 'impressionable years' (IYs), ranging from adolescence to early adulthood (Stocker, 2014).

Plutzer (2002) argues that political engagement or disengagement during impressionable years builds habits that tend to be followed later in life. Socio-political events that occurred at this stage will probably be most influential to one's political development. Social and political events may affect various age groups differently, depending on each group's stage in the life cycle development and its previous experiences. Further, different historical events, such as war, immigration, technological innovation, and cultural change, have an impact on every member of society. However, they are considered to have an especially strong impact on the political attitudes of youth who are in their formative stage of political learning. The change in society and maturity of different cohorts under different conditions result in the members of each cohort developing their views and style of politics (Mishler & Rose, 2007).

According to Grasso et al (2019), generational effects theory has been applied first to studying voter turnout and voter apathy among the youngest generations, accounting for a decline in temporary democracies. Secondly, the theory was applied to studying generational variances in political participation. The central claim is that the younger generation's participation is low because they are more engaged in non-institutionalised forms of political participation (petitions, protests, and online activism). Waas (2008) argues that age is a good predictor of political participation; there are generational effects that young people are subjected to that affect the level of their political participation and determine when and how they will become politically cognizant. This theory is pertinent to understanding the youth's low participation in conventional politics. Weiss & Zhang (2020) argue that young people are more comfortable with new or non-traditional forms of political participation as they do not want to identify themselves with conventional politics. They are more attracted to new (informal) ways of political action or cause-oriented styles of politics, which are mostly regarded as less political. However, it must not be misunderstood or concluded that young people have a problem with politics; young people have a problem with political agents such as politicians and political parties. Besides that, they are more interested in politics and support democracy and elections. This is a result of the top-down nature of modern politics, which has made politicians and political parties irrelevant to the needs and demands of the people.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Youth Participation in Politics and Elections in Botswana

Ntsabane & Ntau (2000) classified Botswana youth as apolitical, a societal group without political cognisance, disinterested in politics and lacking political participation. Historically, the youth in Botswana are known to be less likely to be involved in decision-making activities and participate in the electoral processes. Somolekae (1989) argue that the youth behave in this manner because the Tswana culture and society perceive an individual at this stage to be less mature; hence, they are generally excluded from the political system. This dominant culture dictates who gets elected into political and civic office. A study conducted by the 2002 Democratic Research 8 Project concludes that weak civil society, weak opposition, an unorganized electoral system, and political party factions are the factors causing youth voter apathy and low political participation. Another study conducted in 2022 reveals that 71.6% of the respondents aged between 18 and 25 did not vote, and a cumulative percentage of 62.2% were aged 26 and 55. The study found that 83% of the respondents did not belong to any political party. Furthermore, the study concludes that low participation (failure to register and vote in elections) is caused by various factors including a general lack of knowledge about political parties, lack of interest in partisan politics, lack of credible and ethical political candidates, poor relations between the political representatives and electorates and the lack of recall mechanisms for underperforming politicians (Democracy Research Project, 2022).

Mfundisi (2005) argue that it is important for the youth to participate in democracy and elections as both voters and electorates and to achieve this, civic education must be instilled in Botswana's systems. At a family level, the

Democracy Research Project (2022) reveal that conversations about politics and current events are held occasionally. The study concludes that this affects individuals' political consciousness, and politics are not inculcated into their minds as they develop. Similarly, Seitshiro (2014) argue that one way of promoting youth engagement in politics is through civic education. Civic learning empowers students, particularly at schools, through student movements such as the Student Representative Council (SRC). In most countries, these student movements played a meaningful role in major social and political transitions. Seitshiro gives an example of Kagiso Thutwe, a former SRC president at the University of Botswana, who, upon completion, continued with politics and became the mayor of Gaborone. Furthermore, participating in democratic processes such as voting and being active members of political parties is one way youth can develop skills and knowledge about politics. Through this, there has been a good number of young people contesting for political office prevalent in the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) with the likes of Duma Boko (party leader), Phenyo Butale, Dithapelo Keorapetse, amongst others.

Seitshiro (2014) adds that young people in Botswana occupied leadership positions because they were mentored and developed through daily interactions with their mentors, preparing them to assume those positions. This learning process motivates young people to be outstanding in what they do, exemplified by a few young political leaders who made it to the Botswana parliament, such as Keorapetse, Boko, and Butale. Senior political party members groomed these individuals, allowed them to contest for power, and eventually assumed leadership positions at the party and national level. Most evidently, in 2010, the Botswana National Party (BNP) appointed Duma Boko as its president, who was at a younger age and was perceived as the right candidate to unite and resuscitate the BNP after it faced many challenges (Tutwane, 2012). These examples show that when youth are engaged from a lower level, they have the potential to lead, and they can only do that if they are well groomed and, most importantly, given an opportunity.

Reiter (2024) commends Botswana's democratic processes for being more inclusive. To Reiter, the Botswana political system, an amalgamation of both the modern and traditional systems, is exceptional and allows for a healthy participatory democracy. The former allows average citizens to meet with the local and central leaders to contribute to policies and demand accountability through the *kgotlas* across the country. Likewise, (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1999) concurs that the *kgotla* platform promotes social cohesion in the Tswana society, however, Nyati-Ramahobo disapproves of the lack of participation of the youth and women in the *kgotla* sessions, which remains a problem today. Additionally, Somolekae (1989) notes that the lack of democratic ethics tends to pervade the main social institutions in the Tswana society. Historically, both women and youth have been subjected to men and depended on men for guidance and major decisions at all levels, family, polity, economy, religion and education. In the same vein, Nyamnoh (2014) argue that there is no equality in the *kgotla*; it is a platform where mostly the interests and views of the elites in society are pursued.

Furthermore, Ntsabane and Ntau (2000) perceive that the traditional setup has strongly affected the way the youth view politics in Botswana. In the traditional setup, a *Kgotla* is a public forum that is dominated by tribe leaders and their advisors, who are elderly, conservative section of society. This is how political socialisation played a major role in youth disengagement in public affairs. Nevertheless, as the Tswana society opened and more people, particularly young people, became more educated, the narrative gradually changed. In the same vein, Mfundisi (2005) postulates that the *Kgotla* is led by tribal chiefs who, in most cases, are not elected because the position is hereditary. This is not a platform that can promote the participation of all age groups; the youth and other marginalised groups are systematically excluded from actively participating in decision-making. In contrast, Barei (2000) argue that the *Kgotla* is generally a democratic institution as the Chief cannot act against the people's will and must consult. However, Moumakwa (2010) argue that participation in this traditional setup is generally low, not because people are being denied an opportunity, but because culture dictates an orientation that dominates psychologically. The conservative tradition is rooted in the Tswana political culture that does not consider public affairs a domain for youth.

Additionally, Mompati & Prinsen (2000) note that traditional political power is based on age and social standing, hence, minority groups such as women and youth were not expected to compete for leadership positions. The public sphere has always been reserved for men, and the other groups were excluded. The youth, as Sesanti (2010) argue, are traditionally believed not to be mature enough and were, and still are, excluded from the political process, a culture that is still strong and influences who are elected to political and civic office. Whenever the youth attempt to make an

impact on policymaking, there is mistrust, due primarily to differences in political values and behaviour. Seitshiro (2014) concludes that the saying that `youth are leaders of tomorrow has come to pass; rather, they must be seen as mature individuals who can contribute equally to the development of society. They must be given opportunities in organisations, and the introduction of the quota system in parliament could be a measure to motivate the youth to take leadership positions. However, Seitshiro urges the youth to play their part as self-empowerment is the core of any real empowerment. Youths must be responsible and proactive in their nation`s development.

This study explores youth participation from another perspective, focusing on youth as electorates in elections and politics. Most literature adopts the traditional definition of youth participation in elections by viewing them as voters. Hence, most studies lean towards studying youth voter apathy. Less literature in Botswana explores youth as potential leaders in the electoral process.

4. METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was collected in Gaborone, where all government ministries, most universities, non-governmental organizations, and political parties are headquartered. The respondents are individuals conversant in issues of democracy and elections, and those who face such hindrances. Therefore, the study adopted purposive sampling to select all respondents. In selecting political analysts (academia), the study relied on those leading in interpreting or analysing political trends in Botswana. Six youth league members from the main political parties in Botswana were chosen to obtain more information on the challenges they face in politics. Furthermore, the technique was used to select young members of the 12th Parliament, an officer from the IEC and individuals from civil society organisations whose mandates include elections, democracy, and working closely with youth and political parties. The study selected the following respondents to answer the research questions.

No.	Pen name	Institution / Occupation
1.	Respondent A	Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)
2.	Respondent B	Political analyst (academia)
3.	Respondent C	Organisation for Youth and Elections Botswana (OYEBO)
4.	Respondent D	Youth league member
5.	Respondent E	Political analyst (academia)
6.	Respondent F	Youth league member
7.	Respondent G	Youth league member
8.	Respondent H	Youth league member
9.	Respondent I	Youth league member
10.	Respondent J	A young member of parliament
11.	Respondent K	Youth League Member
12.	Respondent L	Young Minds Africa
13.	Respondent M	Democracy Watch Foundation
14.	Respondent N	A young Member of Parliament

Figure 1: A list of respondents

The research employed in-depth interviews to collect data from fourteen respondents, nine males and five females. An in-depth interview is a technique used to collect intensive individual interviews with a few respondents to obtain their

perspectives on a particular idea or issue (Boyce & Neale, 2008). Unstructured interviews were chosen to have a rigorous conversation and deduce more information from the respondents on the major hindrances to youth participation in politics. The researcher adopted thematic analysis to interpret the data collected. Data analysis involves data reduction, organization and interpretation; similar responses are identified to generate a general overview of the respondents (Belotto, 2018). According to Kiger & Varpio (2020), thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes in the collected data. Thematic analysis closely examines the data to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns to form a narrative regarding answering the research questions. A proper thematic analysis includes data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, naming themes and writing down the report or the narrative.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 The Main Barriers to Youth Participation in Politics and Elections in Botswana

a. The dominance of party elders and weak youth leagues

Most participants argue that political parties do not promote meaningful participation of youth at the political party level. The party elders dominate political parties, youth are not included in policymaking and major party decisions. The structures of political parties exclude youth and promote the domination of the elders. The youth have less to say in decisions about party candidates for elections, they are systematically excluded, and youth leagues are not consulted robustly. Youth participate in politics through youth leagues, which remain weak and exist under the main party committees, which hold so much power. Broadly, one may think the youth are involved in decision-making because it appears in the parties' constitutions that the youth league president sits with the central committees to advocate for the youth. However, the party elders dominate, and their decisions are always endorsed.

Respondent M notes that Democracy Watch Botswana has offered political parties' recommendations on formulating policies to bring inclusivity, meaningful participation, and representation of marginalised groups, mostly women and the youth, within the party structures. However, respondent M claims that there is resistance from the political parties, and out of the 7 political parties they reached, only 3 implemented those recommendations. Respondent M's concern was about the domination of national executive committees over other party structures in decision-making and drafting of party manifestos, only a few elders take control of the whole process, and the people who are mostly affected by the problems are systematically excluded. The respondent referred to political parties in Botswana as, *“...Old boys clubs with an old boy mentality; the party elders from both the ruling party and opposition parties are colleagues, fellow businessmen with the same business interests”*.

Furthermore, most respondents argue that the youth leagues can be compared to women's leagues because they are just auxiliary bodies which yield less power. This is the case, though the youth make up the majority of party members and are very active during political campaigns. They remain powerless and fail to take advantage of their numbers to advocate for their inclusion in decision-making and influence the nomination of candidates. The respondents referred to the youth leagues as *“attack dogs”, “foot soldiers”, “silent and docile committees”, a weapon of the party elders*. The argument raised is that the youth leagues are usually used as a defence team, especially on social media platforms. Young people are usually at the forefront of heavy exchanges between political parties over the parties' leadership and policies. Online platforms like Facebook and Twitter are mostly used by young political party members to attack anyone who is against the party elders and policies.

Respondent B perceives that the youth are involved in daily discussions of politics, however, that is limited and does not bring any tangible results in their inclusion. Respondent B expresses that *“...youth participation exists in bits and pieces, it is not coherent, not systematic enough to yield political results and output. It is a work in progress; its quality is still low, even though there seem to be highly involved and interested in political life, especially through social media debates and discussions. However, that is far from yielding political results in terms of representation in decision-making bodies, partisan bodies like the executive and central committees in civic life”*.

b. Scarcity of resources to contest in elections

The prevalent perception is that the whole electoral process requires individuals who have adequate resources, especially finances. The electoral process is not only about contesting during elections; however, it requires an individual to be present on the ground throughout the 5-year cycle to convince the voters that indeed he/she is the right candidate. The respondents argue that most of the youth do not have the resources to join this competitive and expensive enterprise. Money plays a major role in elections, and only those with money can join the race for political positions. For this reason, the youths are still trying to establish themselves in life and have not accumulated enough resources to drive their political ambitions. This leaves the playground for only a few with money, and in Botswana, these are the elderly and retired, which explains the state of youth participation in elections and low youth representation in Botswana's parliament and councils. Respondent G explains how finances play a major role in politics, particularly at the party level, by stating that, *“...if one looks closely into Botswana politics, most people who are in political positions are those who have been in politics for a long time and those who retired early into politics. These people have a stronger financial muscle, which the youth do not have”*. Furthermore, respondent D adds that *“...the youth do not have a say at the political party level because of their economic status. They do not have the finances to influence decisions. They do not even have the resources to compete in party primary elections. They only serve as helpers to those with the financial power to attain their political ambitions”*.

Youth Unemployment

Most respondents mentioned that unemployment is a major problem facing the youth today, and it is one of the reasons making it difficult for the youth to join politics. The lack of jobs makes it difficult for youth to participate in politics and compete for positions. Youth, including those who hold higher qualifications, face tough economic challenges. The respondents argue that it is difficult for the youth to find employment or well-paying jobs when they complete their studies; those who find jobs are underpaid, and most of them must take care of their families back home. It is difficult for the youth to choose politics over establishing themselves in life and their responsibility of taking care of their parents and families back in the villages. Respondent K expands on how unemployment impedes young people who wish to contest elections. Respondent K argues that *“...youth unemployment rate is over 35 % and general election candidates need resources to be competitive. They need campaign materials, equipment, and large budgets, and unfortunately, they cannot afford them. They end up having no choice but to be in the backseat rather than participating as candidates, the youth are not usually in the forefront because of this reason”*.

In addition, respondent F adds to the above sentiments that *“...politics is a costly enterprise that requires a lot of funding, and one cannot be available only during campaign time. On the 5-year cycle, doing the job on the ground is very expensive, and most young people cannot secure those finances. Mostly in Botswana, a young person who completes tertiary education is expected to work and support his/her family. Hence, their fewer resources cannot also be used for their political ambitions”*. Respondent L supports the above sentiments, arguing that there is high rural-urban migration, especially for tertiary studies and those searching for better opportunities. Most youths are obliged to provide for their families in the rural areas with the little they gain.

According to the respondents, unemployment is a problem that affects youth's progress in society. With no resources, the youth cannot contest elections, especially when there are well-established elderly people with a good resource base. The lack of jobs makes it difficult for the youth to accumulate resources and limits their participation in elections. Respondent E argues that representation in society is linked to an individual's social and economic status, and this has to do with someone's age, wealth or financial background. Respondent E states that *“...the idea of a political leader according to the Tswana society is an individual who satisfies those socioeconomic statuses. This is common in rural areas where voters with low socioeconomic demographics usually reject one of them who tries to stand for elections. They would rather opt for someone from a different or better socioeconomic status. Leadership is linked to a higher socioeconomic status or category, where most youth do not fit yet”*.

c. Lack of civic education

Several respondents strongly perceive that lower youth participation in politics can be associated with a lack of civic education. They argue that there have not been adequate efforts to teach Batswana about their democracy, and why they should effectively be part of all the democratic processes of their country. This lack of civic education is an issue for the elderly and the young. They note that a lack of civic education is worse for the youth as they grow up without understanding the importance of participating in democracy and all its processes. The lack of civic education hinders the dismantling of stereotypes surrounding politics. The respondents state that a lack of civic education results in ignorance of politics, responsibilities and the significance of their participation in a democratic society. Civic education must be extended to the older cohorts in society. It should break stereotypes about politics and leadership and make people aware that in a democracy, they equally have the right to contest in elections. Respondents argue that civic education is key to breaking all the stereotypes which exist in society; it should help inform people so that when they vote, they make informed decisions and are fully aware of the power they possess.

Respondent C postulates that there is no civic education from childhood to make youth aware of democracy and its principles. Respondent C mentioned that *“...as children grow up, they are aware that after some time their country goes for elections, however, they do not know what that means. From independence until 2011, there was no organization or programme directly educating the youth and Batswana about the importance of their democracy and participation in elections. When OYEBO was formed in 2011, it became the first organization with the mandate of educating Batswana and the youth on democracy and elections. The government and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) did not do enough to ensure citizens learn about the importance of participating in elections”*.

The respondent argued that OYEBO is one of the few organisations performing the important role of extending civic education to Batswana. The respondent further argued that there is still work to be done to extend civic education to Batswana by the NGOs and the government. Currently, Batswana are far from understanding the value of their vote and why they should participate in the electoral process. Hence, it becomes difficult for the youth to participate in elections when less is done to teach them about leadership, democracy, and the importance of participating in that democracy. Respondent E supports the above sentiments by stating that civic education must be compulsory from early childhood. The respondent argues that *“...civic education must be infused from the primary level for young people to know that civic engagement is part of their responsibility as good citizens. Lack of civic education results in youth and citizens who are largely passive and believe they do not have a role to play in politics and elections. It makes people think that politics is for the elites, and it is boring”*.

d. Political socialisation

The prevalent perception is that the way young people are socialised from the early stages of life influences their attitude towards politics. Batswana are still very conservative; the Tswana culture has for a long time failed to recognize young people and women in leadership or public spaces. Albeit changing progressively, it continuously affects how youth learn and understand politics. Young people from a younger age are not taught about the importance of politics, and elections, they only get to understand all these as they grow older, mostly at the tertiary level. At the family level, parents do not discuss political issues with their children, they socialize them into believing that politics are for the elderly and that they will get a chance to be part of politics once they are old enough. Respondents argue that the youths mostly engage in political discussions on social media with their peers.

Respondent M opined how Tswana culture continues to affect the success of young people in politics, *“...Botswana is a very conservative society, there is high ignorance of what politics is and how things should be done in a democratic society. This is displayed by how families, media and political parties treat young people. A young person is viewed as someone controversial with less wisdom, there are even Tswana proverbs which emphasize that. One says, ‘being loquacious as a child does not imply you are wise’; however, politics involves a lot of interaction, public engagements and sharing of ideas. This is a way of shutting out young people from public discourse, in short, our culture has never involved a young person”*.

Moreover, the respondents conclude that the Tswana culture has greatly influenced the setup of modern institutions. In political parties, the youth are still viewed as minors; they always come last, and they are not considered for leadership. They are socialized to believe that the leadership is for party elders and their role is to offer support and be proactive during campaigns. That is the mentality instilled into the minds of the youth, and they do not see themselves as fit to be leaders because of their age. Respondent J extends the argument by mentioning that *“...Batswana are not socialized into politics, we develop interests in politics later in life. Most young people are not interested in politics as it is not something they are not socialized into”*. The respondent states that *“...the political parties` way of socializing young people is to persuade them to believe they are foot soldiers. The youth are mainly introduced into the political scene as the foot soldiers for the main runners of the party and remain at that level in their youthful lives. They cannot easily break out of that shell”*.

e. Societal attitude and mentality

Most participants perceive that the way society views and thinks about the youth shows that they do not appreciate that they can be leaders. Elders view youth as still growing and not mature enough to assume leadership positions. The respondents argue that though this is slowly changing, there are still elders who are sceptical about having young people as leaders. Also, some young people still doubt their peers can lead, which may be explained by the way society idealises a leader, focusing on certain qualities such as age and social and economic status. The societal attitude towards the youth has brought a lack of trust and confidence in them; they are considered too rowdy and radical and are not fit to lead. Respondent L expressed that, *“...it seems like the society is uncomfortable with putting their hopes and aspirations on the youth. This can be associated with the fact that for a long time, the youth are associated with negative behaviour, irresponsibility and lack of growth; these stereotypes are still dominant within the society”*.

Additionally, Respondent N mentioned that *“...Tswana culture infantilizes people. Globally, somebody who is 30 years old has done quite a lot; however, in Botswana, a 30-year-old is not considered fit for political positions, simply because those who are 50 and 60 dominate the political space. The first barrier to youth participation in elections is the mentality of the potential voters, as they do not see a potential leader in someone of that age. They believe such an individual will only be ready for leadership in their 50s because that is what people in the society are used to”*.

Moreover, respondents argue that the society`s construct of a leader, in most cases, is someone who satisfies what can be regarded as the traditional roles of a political leader. A leader with strong social relations with the community and present in good and bad times. Respondents argue that most youths are not always available for various reasons; they leave their localities to further their studies or search for job opportunities. They are never around to strengthen their relations with the societies in their localities, and this is not because they choose to. They do not have a chance to be there for the people, as they are still occupied with establishing themselves. Most youths are disadvantaged because the retired and the elderly can satisfy those needs. They are ever-present, with resources and have better relationships with the community, hence they are perceived as fit to hold public office and are mostly preferred by the people.

Respondent J states that *“...the questions which usually come to the voter`s mind are, does the person attend weddings, funerals, and go around the village greeting people? The norm is that such an individual will be voted into power. These override someone`s merits or leadership skills. The problem the youth face is that they migrate to the city, and it is difficult for them to be seen. This becomes a barrier to those who wish to contest elections. They are already disadvantaged against retired candidates who spend most of their time in the local areas”*. Additionally, respondent I mentioned that *“...the Kgotla setup, which can be regarded as the community council, is where the community leaders convene with the people to discuss various issues. This is also where the political leaders meet with the communities, and these meetings are mostly held during weekdays. These are the days when the youth are not present, they are in cities, at school and work. Mostly, the youth do not get a chance to attend these meetings. However, this institution is highly respected and well-recognized in Tswana society, and when political, economic, and social issues are discussed, the youth are not available. As a result, they are disadvantaged, it seems like they are not in touch with the realities of their localities”*.

f. Youth perception of politics

Most participants argue that the youth's view of politics, elections, and governance hinders their engagement in the democratic process. They acknowledge that this is generally caused by misconceptions surrounding politics. The youth view politics as a risky field and not worth the struggle, they associate politics with people who lack honesty and can manipulate or take advantage of other people for their selfish desires. Respondent F argues that *“...youth view politics in a negative light and associate it with liars, manipulators, and dishonest people. They prefer to refrain from politics because they do not want to associate themselves with all these”*. In contrast, respondent (D) explicitly states that *“...most youths do not care about what happens in the political spheres of their country. They are not interested because they believe politics do not represent them. They choose to leave politics to other people, the elders”*.

Most respondents state that the youth believe politics is for the elderly and retired people, ready to lose anything. There is a general conception that when one becomes a politician, such an individual risks losing everything they have worked for. Further, there is an element of fear that those on the opposing side are always at risk of losing and their businesses sabotaged by those in power. This is a risk many young people are not ready to take, especially at an early stage of their adult life; they would rather be in the background than actively compete against the elders who have been in the system for many years. Moreover, respondent D states that the youth are individuals who have just started their careers and their fears about politics are made worse by the fact that in Botswana, the government is the biggest employer; those who are lucky to be employed are bound by the Public Service Act to refrain from active politics. Those who work in the private sector, which is a bit open about politics, do not want to risk their careers; they choose their careers over politics. Respondent D adds that *“...the common practice in Botswana is to work for years and retire into politics as an older person, youth cannot simply choose politics over their careers as they believe there is no certainty in politics. During the party membership recruitments, many capable young men and women in both the public and private sectors refuse to join, and some mention that they are not ready to join any political movement as they want to secure their future first”*.

g. Lack of self-investment

Several respondents perceive that youth's lack of self-investment limits their progression in their political careers. They spend most of their time following party leaders without learning more about leadership and national issues to enrich themselves with the knowledge and skills needed in leadership. Some of the youth leaders in the political parties are incompetent and incapable of eloquently addressing national issues, hence, they fail to attract voters, especially young voters. Whenever they decide to stand for primary elections, they lose. The respondents acknowledge that indeed other factors limit youth participation, however, that does not imply that they should be selected because of their age. Instead, they must be voted for their leadership skills and ability to bring change. The prevalent view is that youth have a mentality of limiting themselves; they mostly lack confidence and do not believe they are old enough to contest and win elections.

Respondent E elaborates that, *“...young people, including those who are politically active, spend most of their youth days doing things which do not contribute anything positive to their political lives. There is little investment in building their political profile and career to attract a good following and build confidence and trust of voters, particularly amongst the youth”*. Moreover, respondent B states that *“...mostly those active in politics have a lower understanding and level of consciousness on national issues. Most youth leagues end up being reduced to what can be characterized as ‘attack dogs’ on behalf of the executive powers of their political parties. That is what they are limited to”*. Additionally, respondent C adds that *“youth leagues do not do much to acquire the necessary skills to improve their political careers. However, being a youth representative does not mean you address only issues affecting the youth. There are many societal issues and if one fails to learn and have a deeper understanding of economies, politics, culture, mining, and agriculture to name a few, if one is not conscious of all these issues, he/she is not in a position to convince people that he can represent them”*.

Respondent M supports the above sentiments by concluding that, *“this is an important discussion to unpack the problem of youth participation and inclusion. However, in politics, especially at the party level, nomination is based on the candidate's strength and the possibility of winning a seat in parliament on behalf of the party. Even the voters*

sometimes may feel that a 60-year-old can represent their interests better than someone young. Representation is all about Agenda – Principal relationships, voters send people to parliament because they see their strength and capability to represent their interests better`. The respondent elaborates that, `... the argument of having strong candidates still applies to women representatives. Just because one is a woman does not mean she can represent women`s interests better. Some men can also represent women better if they better understand women`s interests or demands. In short, youth must invest in themselves as they cannot be voted into power just because of their age. They have to convince voters that indeed they are ready to lead`.

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The main hindrances to youth`s meaningful participation in politics and elections are political, socioeconomic, and cultural. Political parties, as the main agents of political participation in a democracy, are mainly dominated by the elderly, leaving no space for the youth. Youth participate through powerless auxiliary bodies at the mercy of those party elders. Youth leagues exist to rubberstamp the decisions of central committees and, in most cases, fail to represent the views of youth. Similarly, Desrues & Kirhlin (2013) note that political parties are the main barrier to youth participation because they mostly lack internal party democracy. Youth participation in Botswana is visible on social media; however, far from yielding political results in terms of representation and inclusion in decision-making bodies. Moreover, politics is a costly enterprise. Chitukutuku (2014) concludes that money is a deciding factor in politics, and those with finances have a higher chance of winning elections. The lack of resources among youth limits their participation in this costly enterprise as they are striving to establish themselves in life. United Nations, Botswana (2021) reports that youth are very vulnerable and high unemployment causes youth to remain dependent up to the age of 32. With the level of unemployment in Botswana, youth are further excluded from politics. Unemployment is an enemy of progress in the lives of young people. Shea and Green (2007) note that unemployment and poverty bring feelings of inferiority and purposelessness and affect how society perceives youth.

Botswana`s civic education remains low, leading to undemocratic young people. They are not taught the importance of participating in their democracy from a younger age. Youth become politically cognizant later in life because they have not been groomed into democracy. Mfundisi (2006) associates lower youth participation in elections with the lack of civic education from early childhood. Young people in Botswana are not socialized into politics, leadership and democracy, which affects how they perceive politics. In addition, political socialization infantilizes youth, and this culture is dominant in modern institutions, including political parties. Youth are still seen as followers of party elders who will mature and assume leadership someday. Adeleke (2017) perceive that cultural values extend to politics and continuously limit youth participation, making it difficult for them to seek leadership positions in political parties and society. Furthermore, the Tswana society has not fully accepted youth as potential leaders. They are still sceptical because leadership is attached to certain qualities such as age and social, and economic status. Youth are still considered to be less mature, rowdy and radical. Lastly, the youth`s perception of politics is also a barrier; they associate politics with dishonesty and manipulation and do not wish to associate with politics. They consider politics risky, for those ready to lose what they have achieved. Youth also fail to invest in their political careers at a younger age. Instead of learning and acquiring knowledge about politics, they spend most of their time fighting the political battles of their party leaders. Hence, most fail to impress even their peers whenever they stand for elections.

7. CONCLUSION

The barriers to youth participation in politics are political, socioeconomic and cultural. Youth find it very challenging to meaningfully participate in politics because it is a field dominated by the elderly. Youth participation is mainly through weak youth leagues under the control of party elders. Moreover, youths lack resources, the primary deciding factor in politics, exacerbated by the problem of unemployment, which further delays their progress in society. The lack of civic education results in undemocratic youths who do not fathom democratic values and the importance of meaningfully participating in politics and democracy. Furthermore, the socialization of young people in Botswana makes them shy away from politics; they are made to believe it is a field for the elderly, and they are the leaders of tomorrow. Even the Tswana society is still reluctant to accept youth as equal contributors to society, they are viewed as problematic and immature. On the other side, youth perceive politics as a devious game because people would do

anything possible to win power, something they are not ready to be part of. Lastly, youth do not take their time to invest in their political careers, they mostly prefer to be in the backseat, where they play a role supporting those who seek political positions.

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