



POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS RESOURCE HUB

A subsidiary of the International Centre for Political Campaigns (ICPC)

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS WATCH: OBSERVATION REPORT ON THE CAMPAIGN PERIOD AHEAD OF ZAMBIA'S AUGUST 2026 GENERAL ELECTION REPORT

ABOUT US

Political Campaigns Resource Hub



The Political Campaigns Resource Hub (PCRH) is a subsidiary of the International Centre for Political Campaigns (ICPC), headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa. It professionalises political campaigning by building tools, training people, and setting the standards campaigns need to win.



International Centre for Political Campaigns



The International Centre for Political Campaigns (ICPC) is the parent body under which the Political Campaigns Resource Hub (PCRH) operates. ICPC's broader mandate is to professionalise political campaigning across the globe by building tools, training practitioners, and setting standards for how campaigns are conducted.

WHAT IS THE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN WATCH (PCW) PROJECT?

The PCW Project is PCRH's field based monitoring programme. It documents how political campaigns are actually conducted, covering tactics, messaging, resourcing and the environment for competition, during the active campaign period ahead of an election. It is distinct from election monitoring. Where observer missions assess whether a vote was free and fair, campaign watchers document how power is competed for in the weeks and months beforehand.

FOREWORD

Zambia has voted. The question now is what the numbers really mean.

For those of us who study and run political campaigns, we know the result is not decided at the counting centre. The election is won long before Election Day.

The distinction matters.

Election administration and political campaigning are related, but they are not the same discipline. Elections are governed by laws, procedures, registration systems, ballots, polling stations, and the counting and transmission of results. Campaigns are about something different. They are about how political actors identify, persuade, organise, and mobilise enough voters to win.

An election gives people the opportunity to choose. A campaign shapes the choices they eventually make and, critically, whether they choose to participate at all.

This is the space in which Political Campaigns Watch operates.

We are not election observers. We study campaigns.

We are interested in what happens before the ballot reaches the box. Who are campaigns targeting? What does their data tell them? What messages are they testing? How are candidates positioned? Where are resources being deployed? Are rallies translating into organised support? Are volunteers being used effectively? Are campaigns reaching voters directly? And, ultimately, are they converting political support into actual votes?

For six weeks, our Political Campaigns Watchers were deployed on the ground in Zambia to observe these dynamics.

Our purpose was never to predict the winner. It was to understand how the contest for the voter was unfolding.

We followed campaign tactics, candidate activity, messaging, mobilisation, grassroots organising, voter contact and the different ways parties and candidates attempted to build and convert support.

Because every number in the final result is a choice made on the campaign trail.

A voter may have responded to a message. Another may have been persuaded by a candidate. Someone may have received a phone call, attended a community meeting, or been contacted by an organiser. Somewhere, campaign data may have directed resources towards the right constituency, while elsewhere, a campaign may have spent heavily without reaching the voters who mattered.

And then there is perhaps the most important campaign outcome of all: the voter who did not vote.

Those voters matter because campaign performance cannot be measured only by who won. It must also be interrogated through who campaigns failed to reach, persuade or mobilise.

This is why the final result should never be the end of campaign analysis. It should be its starting point.

The tally tells us what happened.

Campaign analysis asks why it happened, where it happened, which tactics worked, which failed, and what future campaigns can learn from it.

Political campaigns across Africa deserve this level of scrutiny. Conventional analysis begins when polling stations open and ends when results are declared. Yet some of the most consequential political decisions have already been made months before, in strategy rooms, field operations, voter databases, candidate schedules, message development, resource allocation, and thousands of interactions between campaigns and voters.

Our work at the International Centre for Political Campaigns (ICPC) is built around changing that lens. We want political campaigns to be understood as a serious professional discipline that can be observed, measured, studied and improved.

This report therefore looks beyond Zambia's final numbers and back into the campaign that produced them.

And it leaves us with a question that should concern every political campaign practitioner:

Beyond winning and losing, how effective were Zambia's campaigns at expanding participation and reaching the registered voters who ultimately stayed home?

Because the ballot box recorded the final decision.

The campaign built the conditions that produced it.



Glen Mpani
Group Lead
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INTRODUCTION

Political Campaigns Watch (PCW) is a field-monitoring initiative of the Political Campaigns Resource Hub (PCRH), a subsidiary of the International Centre for Political Campaigns (ICPC). PCW deployed trained campaign watchers to observe the campaign period preceding the 13 August 2026 general election in the Republic of Zambia. This deployment is PCRH's first in-country monitoring exercise. The Hub's prior work, an analysis of Uganda's 2026 election, was conducted entirely through desk research. The first cohort of PCW campaign watchers was trained in a one-day orientation at the Protea Hotel, Lusaka, on 23 June 2026. Watchers were then deployed across six provinces, Lusaka, Copperbelt, Luapula, Northern, Eastern, and Southern. They observed continuously through election day, 13 August 2026.

PCW's mandate is distinct from that of an election observation mission. Where election observers assess whether a vote was administered freely and fairly on polling day, PCW observes the period before the ballot is cast: how political actors campaigned for votes in the weeks leading up to the election. This report is based on six weeks of consolidated observations covering ground-level campaigning, digital and social media activity, candidate messaging, campaign resourcing, the electoral environment, voter sentiment, campaign innovation, and voter mobilisation and data usage.

PCW did not itself observe voting, counting or results processes, which fall outside its mandate. The results cited in this statement are the official figures released by the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) and are included only to assess them against the campaign activity PCW observed.

Each week, watchers assessed activity in their assigned province against eight fixed monitoring dimensions and assigned each a signal of Routine, Notable or Concern. These methods allowed findings to be compared across provinces and over time.



RATIONALE FOR MONITORING POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS IN ZAMBIA

8.7 million Zambians were registered to vote in August 2026. Historically, voter turnout has been around 50%. The question PCW was set up to answer was not just who is campaigning the most, but who is persuasive enough to close that gap.

To put the 2026 election in context, it must be considered alongside the most recent general election in 2021.

Indicator	2021	2026	Change
Registered voters	7,023,499	8,786,300	+1,762,801
Votes cast	4,959,332	5,028,616	+69,284
Turnout	70.61%	57.23%	-13.38 points
Registered voters who did not vote	2,064,167	3,757,684	+1,693,517
Non-voting share of register	29.39%	42.77%	+13.38 points

Source: Electoral Commission of Zambia, 2021 and 2026 presidential results and voter registration statistics.
<https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/239/>

Between the two elections, Zambia's voter register increased by about 25%, but total ballots cast increased by only about 1.4%. At an aggregate level, for every 100 additional names added to the register, total votes cast increased by only about four. Registration growth was therefore absorbed almost entirely by declining turnout, rather than additional participation. That gap, not the contest between the two leading candidates, is the starting point for this report.

Across election cycles, Zambia's turnout has swung sharply from one election to the next, at times rising above 70%, and at others falling below one in three registered voters. That volatility is the reason PCW exists in Zambia. The question is not whether campaigns were visible, but whether what they did was likely to turn registered voters into actual voters.

Election	Turnout
2001	68.6%
2006	70.6%

Election	Turnout
2008 (presidential by-election, following President Mwanawasa's death)	45.4%
2011	53.6%
2015 (presidential by-election, following President Sata's death)	32.4%
2016	56.0%
2021	70.3%
2026	57.23%

Source: IFES Election Guide, country profile for Zambia, <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/239/>

Turnout in ordinary general elections has ranged between roughly 53% and 71% over the past two decades. Average turnout across Zambia's last fifteen national polls sits at approximately 57.5%, meaning that in a typical election, close to half of registered voters do not cast a ballot. The tactics campaigns actually deployed this cycle which are door-to-door canvassing, rallies, radio, social media, and limited data collection are largely the same tactics campaigns have used across elections with very different turnout outcomes. Against that backdrop, PCW's central question throughout this deployment has been whether those tactics were the kind that actually closes Zambia's turnout gap, or simply what campaigns do by default.

FINDINGS

PCRH's unit of analysis throughout this deployment is its eight-dimension monitoring framework, applied consistently by watchers across all six provinces in all six weeks: ground-level campaign tactics; digital and social media campaigning; candidate and party messaging; campaign resources and financing; the electoral environment and political conditions; voter sentiment and ground mood; innovation and notable tactics; and voter mobilisation and data usage. The findings below are organised around these eight dimensions.

i. Ground-Level Campaign Tactics



Door-to-door canvassing was the dominant tactic nationwide across the six-week period, alongside rallies, roadshows and community meetings in every province. In Lusaka Central, independent candidate Mwila Chriseddy Bwanga personally telephoned roughly 15,000 voters from a list he built himself from Facebook engagement. In Luapula, independent parliamentary candidate Professor Gibson Mwewa walked door-to-door across communities, attending funerals and visiting markets, later adding a branded-vehicle roadshow after his campaign billboards were destroyed. Members of the Tonse Pamodzi Alliance paid courtesy visits to traditional leaders in Luapula ahead of rallies, while candidates in Choma Central and Kitwe paired roadshows with market visits.

Rallies were deliberately held near college campuses to reach first-time voters. Feeding centres, pioneered by Alexander Sakala in Matero, were adopted by other candidates as an alternative to distributing T-shirts. Community clean-ups, used by Simon Mwewa in Lusaka and by NRPUP in Luapula, replaced rallies in several instances and were adopted in Mansa East and Mansa West later in the campaign.

Symbolic gestures of humility and solidarity were observed across provinces. Candidates were seen kneeling, asking for votes in Southern, Eastern and Copperbelt provinces. Another candidate shared a meal with residents during a door-to-door visit in Copperbelt. Other candidates assisted with household chores during visits or spoke directly to motorists queuing in traffic in Lusaka.



At the presidential-level, campaigning combined constituency-level activity with high-profile tours. President Hichilema's two-day tour of Luapula covered eight locations, while Vice President Nalumango's multi-day tour included courtesy calls to multiple traditional leaders. Musicians, including Aqualaskin and Yo Maps, performed at rallies, and a well-known actor publicly endorsed a candidate at a Copperbelt rally. A life-sized mascot appeared at presidential rallies in at least two forms over the course of the campaign.

In Luapula, no campaign activity of any kind including rallies, meetings, door-to-door activity, posters or campaign structures of any kind was observed for the Liberal Democrats Party presidential candidate, despite the province being allocated to him under the Electoral Commission of Zambia's campaign timetable. The candidate remained in police custody during that period, and had withdrawn from the presidential race prior to his allocated window.

ii. Digital and Social Media Campaigning

Facebook was the dominant digital platform nationwide throughout the monitoring period, ahead of TikTok, X and Instagram, and was used to livestream rallies, publish schedules and circulate photographs and video. WhatsApp and, less frequently, TikTok supported Facebook activity, particularly in Lusaka. Independent trackers estimate that Facebook's reach covers only one-fifth to one-third of Zambia's population, skewed younger, more male and more urban than the electorate as a whole.

Community radio functioned as a parallel campaign infrastructure throughout the six weeks, including Culture FM in the Copperbelt, Musangu Community Radio and KFM in Luapula, and Radio Luswepo and Walamo Radio in Northern Province, through sponsored interviews, phone-ins and rebroadcast coverage. Several candidates increasingly produced self-recorded content rather than relying on a production crew. Simon Mwewa was among the first to adopt this approach, with more candidates following as the campaign progressed.

A politically charged song circulated widely online and was played at an entertainment venue in Lusaka. Its circulation led to a journalist being summoned by police, a DJ being dismissed, and the venue issuing a public apology. Digital campaigning was markedly weaker in rural areas of Eastern and Northern provinces, where limited connectivity reduced livestreaming and online reach.

iii. Candidate and Party Messaging

Core campaign messaging was consistent nationwide, focusing on development, jobs, cost of living, education, infrastructure and service delivery. Governing-party messaging emphasised continuity, citing free education, the Constituency Development Fund, and teacher and health worker recruitment. Opposition messaging emphasised change, citing unemployment, delayed payments to farmers, the cost of living and criticism of service delivery.

Several candidates used spouses to broaden their public presence, including United Party for National Development's Andrew Lubusha and independent candidate Mwila Bwanga, who both brought their wives onto the campaign trail in the same week. Nalumango's provincial tour included engagement with clergy, and religious rhetoric featured in messaging from at least one presidential contender. Both presidential frontrunners skipped the scheduled presidential debate.

Campaign slogans were widely used and locally adapted, including “Salt Sana,” “Pe Lampi,” “Vote Suit,” “Bally” and “Tulechula,” among numerous constituency-specific variants. Sector-specific messaging appeared in the Copperbelt, where one presidential candidate pledged to establish a National Miners' Day. Water supply, ranked as the second-highest national concern among Zambians, was raised less often than the cost of living, roads, health or agriculture. One notable exception was an independent candidate in Lusaka who used drama and short video, including a woman carrying a water bucket, to visually demonstrate the daily burden of collecting water.



iv. Campaign Resources and Financing

Resourcing differences between candidates were visible in every province monitored. The governing party generally demonstrated better access to branded vehicles, T-shirts, caps, chitenge material, public address systems and organised transport. By the middle of the campaign, presidential-level events had scaled to include helicopter transport, professionally produced livestreams, and performances by some of the country's highest-paid commercial musicians.

At the other end of the scale, several independent and smaller-party candidates campaigned with a single printed banner or no materials at all. Residents in at least one ward said they liked their candidate, but doubted his resources were sufficient to make him competitive. Democratic Union Party President Ackim Njobvu publicly acknowledged that limited financial resources were constraining his campaign. Two isolated reports bordered on direct inducement. At a joint independent rally in Southern Province, food and transport were provided to supporters travelling from other wards. At a campaign event held at a college in the same province, a watcher reported envelopes being handed to school management and the ward chairperson, reportedly to purchase food for participating students. Neither report was independently confirmed beyond the watcher's account.

Separately, campaigning by the governing party at a public medical university in Lusaka generated public concern about the appropriateness of political activity at a state-linked institution.

v. Electoral Environment and Political Conditions

The playing field remained largely open across the six-week campaign period, but incidents escalated over time, from venue disputes and isolated, low-level friction in the early weeks to incidents involving police intervention, alleged intimidation, and vandalism by midpoint.

In Lusaka, an opposition candidate reported being summoned to a police station, and questioned about campaign financing by an individual claiming to represent the Office of the President. In the following week, a roadshow led by opposition figures Brian Mundubile and Makebi Zulu was reportedly blocked by police with tear gas deployed, while a separate candidate's campaign centre was allegedly vandalised.

The campaign's most serious week saw three provinces record incidents of the same severity simultaneously. In Eastern Province, an opposition campaign activity in Dilika Ward was disrupted by individuals identified as ruling-party cadres, halting the event. In the Copperbelt, police ordered the cancellation of a Mundubile and Zulu rally in Ndola and blocked access routes to the venue. This was the second time police disrupted a rally led by the same two figures. In Lusaka, the political-song controversy described earlier unfolded in the same week.

Two further incidents involved individual candidates' safety and property. An independent candidate in Southern Province reported avoiding staying late at her own rally after an earlier alleged attack linked to her independent candidacy. Another independent candidate in Luapula reported that his campaign billboards had been destroyed earlier in the campaign.

In the campaign's final full week, most provinces returned to routine conditions. Watchers again noted unequal access to the state broadcaster ZNBC for opposition parties in Lusaka, and unresolved allegations of earlier attacks on opposition supporters in Eastern Province. None of the incidents described in this section were independently verified by PCW watchers beyond what candidates, parties or bystanders reported, and the broader national picture remained one of a campaign that ran largely without obstruction. The clustering of multiple serious incidents at the campaign's midpoint nonetheless marks a clear escalation from the isolated, lower-severity incidents recorded earlier in the monitoring period.

vi. Voter Sentiment and Ground Mood



Voter engagement was consistently high across all provinces monitored, with views that were mixed rather than one-sided. Nationally, voter concerns centred on development, cost of living, employment and service delivery in line with national polling trends. While cost of living, water supply and health rank among the top national concerns reported by Zambians, water supply was raised by watchers in campaign messaging less frequently than its ranking as a major national concern would suggest.

Several communities expressed a preference for candidates perceived as locally accessible and able to deliver tangible development, regardless of party affiliation.

Interest in women's leadership recurred across multiple provinces, with voters in several wards explicitly stating a preference for female representation. Youth turned out consistently at campaign events, and several campaigns targeted youth and women specifically through dedicated engagements. Voter enthusiasm did not always track candidate resourcing. In several instances, well-resourced rallies drew large crowds but lacked meaningful engagement, while modestly resourced independent candidates generated strong personal loyalty within their communities.

vii. Innovation and Notable Tactics

Artificial intelligence featured in the campaign in two forms: an AI-generated phone call used to gauge ground support in Northern Province, and an AI-generated campaign song that circulated in Lusaka. Other innovations were lower-tech. These included political cartoons and influencer engagement in Lusaka, and symbolic performances, including supporters holding lit lamps at a rally in Northern Province.

Grassroots, supporter-generated content not directed by any formal campaign structure also featured throughout the campaign. This included a clay model of a party symbol made by young supporters in Northern Province and hand-drawn campaign artwork presented to a candidate in Luapula. Mock ballot papers were used by one candidate in Luapula to guide first and second time voters through the voting process, in a constituency where most registered voters are under 35. Waste bin distribution and clean-city messaging were used by one Lusaka candidate to link a practical service to his campaign identity, while a helicopter arrival by one parliamentary candidate drew crowds curious to see the aircraft.

viii. Voter Mobilisation and Data Usage

Across the monitoring period, PCW found consistent evidence that campaigns attempted to collect information on supporters, and equally clear evidence that they lacked the systems to use it effectively. In Southern Province, several campaigns required supporters to register with door-to-door teams before receiving party regalia. This practice was later observed in Livingstone, where attendance registers and tally sheets were used to record supporters before distributing regalia at rallies. In Luapula, a separate independent campaign used its own supporter data sheets to identify and track potential voters.

The most developed data asset observed across the six provinces was Bwanga's 15,000-name phone list in Lusaka, built from Facebook engagement. In Eastern Province, there was one unverified allegation that the governing-party campaign was collecting voters' National Registration Card details and recording names in notebooks. This could not be independently confirmed by watchers. At no point during the six week monitoring period did watchers observe any digital voter-mobilisation systems, canvassing apps, SMS targeting or confirmed structured voter databases being used in the six provinces monitored.

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

i. Traditional Tactics Recurring Without Evidence of Data-Driven Targeting

Rallies, posters and branded T-shirts remained the default tactic for most candidates in every week of the monitoring period. PCW found no evidence that this approach was informed by audience research, past election results or voter data. No campaign was observed using such data to decide where or how to deploy these tactics effectively. They recurred because they are the established norm, not because campaigns demonstrated they were the most effective option available.

ii. Resourcing Inequality

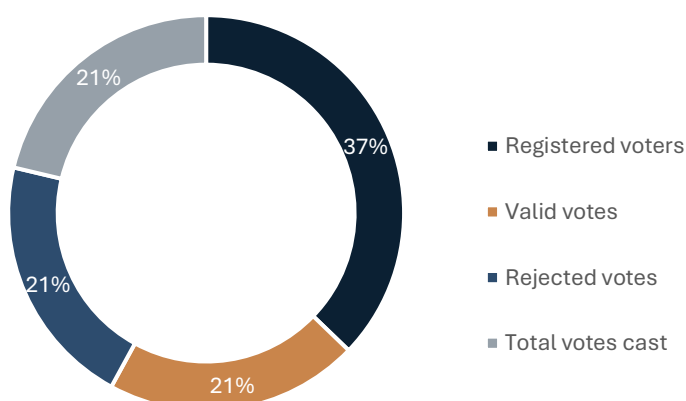
Resourcing inequality was visible throughout the campaign and widened at the top of the ticket as it progressed, from branded T-shirts and mascots in the early stages to helicopter-supported provincial tours by the midpoint. By contrast, under-resourced candidates relied on low-cost, high-effort tactics such as door-to-door canvassing, personal phone calls, community radio and direct, personal appeals. The gap in what different campaigns could attempt was one of the clearest patterns PCW observed.

RESULTS AND THE TURNOUT QUESTION

On 13 August 2026, Zambians cast their votes across all 226 constituencies. The table below presents the official consolidated presidential results, released by the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ).

Candidate (Party)		Votes
Hakainde Hichilema (UPND)		2,965,326
Brian Mundubile (NRPUP)		1,855,217
Harry Kalaba (CF)		19,070
Kelvin Fube Bwalya (ZMP)		17,078
Fred M'membe (SP)		12,194
Given Katuta (IND)		7,574
Given Chansa (MEE)		6,650
Brian Mushimba (OPP)		6,269
Richard Silumbe (LM)		3,304
Howard Kunda (ZAWAPA)		2,561
Ackim Njobvu (DU)		2,496
Richwell Siamunene (NFP)		1,963
Daniel Pule (CDP)		1,348

Measure	Figure
Registered voters	8,786,300
Valid votes	4,902,050
Rejected votes	126,566
Total votes cast	5,028,616
Voter turnout	57.23%



When Political Campaigns Watch began monitoring in June, it led with a specific question: 8.7 million Zambians were registered to vote, and historically only about half turned out. The question, therefore, was not merely who was campaigning the most, but who was persuasive enough to close that gap.

The results indicate that the gap was not meaningfully closed. Turnout was recorded at 57.23%, essentially in line with 57.5% average PCW had calculated across Zambia's last fifteen national polls, and more than 13 percentage points below the 70.3% recorded in 2021, the most recent comparable general election. Of the 8,786,300 registered voters, roughly 3,757,684 people, did not cast a ballot at all. Six weeks of rallies, AI-generated content, mascots, celebrity endorsements, feeding centres, community clean-ups and a presidential tour by helicopter produced turnout no higher than Zambia's average across two decades of elections conducted without most of those tactics.

This is consistent with what PCW found throughout the campaign period. High-visibility and high-resource tactics generated attention and crowds at those events and in that moment. However, PCW found no evidence that any campaign used voter data to identify and specifically re-engage the roughly 3.8 million registered Zambians least likely to vote. The tactics the research identified as most closely associated with direct voter engagement, which are personal phone calls, door-to-door canvassing, and community radio, were also the tactics used at the smallest scale, and largely by the most under-resourced candidates.

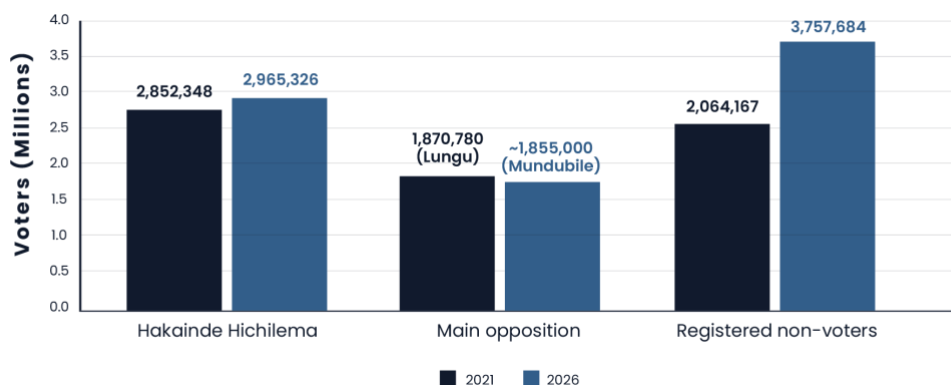
The resourcing gap this monitoring tracked throughout the campaign is also visible in the results themselves. Hichilema and Mundubile, the two candidates with by far the greatest visible campaign resourcing, took a combined 98.3% of the valid vote. Democratic Union Party President Ackim Njobvu, who publicly acknowledged that limited financial resources were constraining his campaign, received 2,496 votes nationally, one of the three lowest tallies of the fourteen candidates.

Rejected ballots totalled 126,566, about 2.5% of all votes cast. PCW cannot establish from this data alone whether voter education efforts observed during the campaign, such as the mock ballot demonstrations used in Luapula, had any measurable effect on that figure, since no comparable baseline was tracked during the monitoring period.

Six weeks of intensive campaigning, much of it well-resourced and highly visible, shifted turnout only marginally from Zambia's historical average. This does not represent a break from the long-standing pattern of roughly four in ten registered Zambians not voting in any given election. Whether targeted, data-driven mobilisation of the kind recommended in this report will do better is the open question PCW carries into the next cycle.

THE MISSING VOTER: 2021 to 2026

Placed against 2021, the scale of that open question becomes clearer. Zambia's registered non-voting population, the people on the roll who did not cast a ballot, grew from 2,064,167 in 2021 to 3,757,684 in 2026. This is an increase of 1,693,517 people, or roughly 82%, in a single electoral cycle. As a share of the register, non-voters increased from 29.39% to 42.77%. The registered voters who did not vote in 2026 outnumber Hichilema's winning total and are more than double the principal opposition candidate's tally.



NOTE: Edgar Lungu led Zambia's ruling Patriotic Front party during the 2021 general election before losing the presidency to Hakainde Hichilema.

Growth in the register did not translate into comparable gains for either leading candidate. Hichilema's absolute vote grew by about 113,000, roughly 4%, while the register itself expanded by about 1.76 million, roughly 25%. Measured against the full registered electorate rather than valid votes cast, his support fell from approximately 40.61% of the register in 2021 to approximately 33.75% in 2026. The principal opposition candidate's vote was essentially flat, close to its 2021 level, despite a significantly expanded register. Neither of the two leading parties converted the growing numbers into larger vote shares. The main shift was from turnout to abstention, not between parties.

Zambia now effectively has three electoral populations: the roughly 5.03 million people who voted and decided the election; the roughly 3.76 million registered voters who did not, and a further, less precisely measured population of eligible citizens who remain outside the register entirely. The second and third populations combined are almost certainly larger than the electorate that decided the outcome.

This report's findings help explain why. Across six weeks and six provinces, PCW found no campaign using registered-voter data to identify, segment or specifically re-contact low-propensity or newly registered voters. Campaign tactics were driven by convention rather than by evidence. The same rallies, posters, and branded T-shirts were deployed at similar scale regardless of a ward's registration growth or turnout history. The failure of campaigns to use data not only leaves the turnout gap unclosed but coincides with that gap widening. It also makes campaign tactics random rather than targeted: resources are spread evenly across a constituency, rather than concentrated where the data shows non-voters and newly registered voters. Between 2021 and 2026, the registered non-voting population grew by roughly 1.69 million people and that is more than four times the margin separating the two leading presidential candidates. This report concludes by providing actionable insights directly tailored to solve this challenge.

For more analysis on Zambia's missing voter visit: <https://politicalhub.africa/2026/09/04/zambias-missing-voter-a-comparative-analysis-of-the-2021-and-2026-presidential-elections/>

CONCLUSION AND INSIGHTS

Conclusion

During the six week observation period, Zambia's 2026 general election campaign was defined less by any single dominant tactic than by a consistent split between visibility and substance. Mascots, musicians, branded regalia and AI-generated content, which was well resourced by the governing party, remained largely unavailable to under-resourced independents. By contrast, the tactics most associated with direct personal engagement, which are phone calls, doorstep conversations, community radio, and self-recorded video, required comparatively little money but significant time, and were available in different forms to both well-funded and self-funded candidates.

Data use remained rudimentary across all six provinces. Campaigns are beginning to ask who showed up, but have not yet built systems to act on the answer. Across the six provinces, PCW found no campaign using registered-voter data in a structured way to drive targeting or turnout strategy. The electoral environment started largely open, but hardened as the campaign progressed, with the most serious incidents clustering around the midpoint, before easing in the final week. Set against a turnout record that has swung by nearly 40 percentage points over the last two decades, the final turnout of 57.23% confirms that this campaign period did not close Zambia's turnout gap in any meaningful way. It landed almost exactly on the historical average rather than above it. PCW will continue monitoring as the post-election period unfolds.

Insights

With six weeks of campaign observation complete, PCW offers the following recommendations:

For Political Parties and Candidates:

Shift from Messaging to Data-Driven Strategy

Once voter registration closes, parties can no longer grow the roll. They can only work smarter with who is already on it. This shifts the campaign period from a registration exercise to a targeting and turnout exercise.

PCW urges parties and candidates to:

- Segment the registered voters by turnout propensity, not just geography or demographics, focusing direct, repeated contact on low-propensity registered voters rather than on broad messaging.
- Use ward and voting-district-level data to prioritise limited canvassing resources towards areas with high registration but historically low turnout, rather than spreading effort evenly.
- Build Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) infrastructure early by using the closed roll to plan sequenced door-to-door, WhatsApp and SMS contact programmes over the remaining campaign period, rather than leaving them to the final days.
- Track and adapt in real time by treating the campaign period as a feedback loop that measures which contact methods and messages move which segments, and reallocate effort accordingly.
- Channel campaign resources to what the data shows works by directing them towards the wards, activities and contact methods proven effective, rather than distributing budget evenly across a constituency or defaulting to conventional tactics.
- Adopt purpose-built campaign management tools, such as KampaignOS that support data visualisation, a party database and voter mobilisation in one place, rather than relying on paper registers, spreadsheets or informal contact lists that cannot be analysed or reused between elections.

Treat Campaigning as a Continuous Process, Not an Event

With the 2026 election concluded, campaigning for the next election effectively begins now, not months before the next polling day. Parties and candidates that treat campaigning as a single, time-boxed event lose the data, relationships and lessons built during this campaign the moment it ends, and start the next cycle from convention rather than evidence.

PCW recommends that parties and candidates:

- Preserve and build on the voter data gathered during this campaign, including contact lists and turnout patterns, rather than discarding it once the election is over.
- Use the period between elections to analyse which wards, voting districts and voter segments were reached effectively during the 2026 campaign and which were not, and let that pattern inform where the next cycle's campaigning starts.
- Maintain continuous, lower-intensity voter contact between elections, rather than reactivating relationships from scratch each election.
- Build data-driven strategy into the campaign's permanent structure, so that targeting and turnout decisions in the next cycle are informed by evidence from the 2026 cycle rather than starting from convention each time.

Conduct Monitoring and Evaluation of the 2026 Campaign

PCW recommends that parties and candidates formally evaluate the campaign that just ended while the data and institutional memory from the campaign are still fresh, rather than moving straight into preparation for the next cycle without a structured review.

This monitoring and evaluation exercise should:

- Assess which tactics, ground activity, digital content, messaging, and resourcing decisions actually reached and moved voters, versus those that simply generated visibility.
- Review turnout outcomes by ward and voting district against the campaign effort invested in each to identify where investment and turnout were mismatched.
- Document what worked, what did not and why, in a form that can be consulted at the start of the next campaign rather than relying on institutional memory alone.

- Use the findings of this evaluation to directly inform the strategy and tactical choices for the next election, so that the next campaign begins from evidence rather than starting anew.
- Ensure that campaign resourcing disparities do not translate into unequal access to voters, particularly in under-resourced constituencies.
- Refrain from any activity that could be perceived as inducement, however isolated, and ensure campaign teams understand the distinction between legitimate voter support and material inducement.
- Maintain campaign discipline in contested wards and coordinate proactively with rivals and the Electoral Commission of Zambia to avoid scheduling disputes.

State Institutions and the Electoral Commission of Zambia

- Ensure equitable access to the state broadcaster for all registered parties and candidates.
- Enforce the campaign schedule consistently across provinces and parties to reduce venue disputes and scheduling conflicts.

Media

- Continue providing platforms for campaign coverage, and extend equitable coverage to smaller and independent candidates whose campaigns rely on earned rather than paid media.

Civil Society and Future Campaign Watch Deployments

- Continue tracking the gap between traditional campaign tactics and the voter-data infrastructure that could make them more strategically focused.
- Extend monitoring into the post-election period to observe whether relationships built during the campaign translate into constituency-level accountability, beyond election day.

In Closing: The Final Tally

Between 2021 and 2026, Zambia's registered non-voting population grew from 2,064,167 (29.39% of the register) to 3,757,684 (42.77% of the register), an increase of approximately 1.69 million people. Closing that gap, not simply contesting it, is the task the recommendations above are addressed to.



AFTERWORD

The intellectual foundation of the Political Campaigns Resource Hub's political campaign-watching initiative is built on the premise that election outcomes are, in part, the accumulated consequence of decisions made by parties, candidates, campaign professionals, organisers, and voters throughout the campaign period. Campaign watching exists to make those decisions visible while they are still being made.

It is during a campaign period that political actors reveal how they understand the electorate, assess their opponents, deploy resources, and attempt to convert political support into electoral outcomes. Campaigns produce evidence. Our eight-dimension framework is designed to turn the complexity of live political competition into evidence that can be documented, compared, and analysed across parties, regions, countries and electoral cycles.

Observation alone, however, is not enough. We are interested in the strategic significance of what campaigns do. At the centre of this inquiry is the 'missing voter', defined as an eligible citizen who is not registered, or a registered voter who does not ultimately vote (International Centre for Political Campaigns, 2026).

The 'missing voter' provides a critical test for assessing campaign activity. It gives us a lens for moving beyond visibility and activity. By assessing whether a particular tactic is persuasive or merely visible, and whether it demonstrates genuine data-driven mobilisation or simply the appearance of outreach, we can understand whether campaigns are extending their reach to the missing voter, or merely reinforcing support among those already likely to participate.

From Zambia, we are now applying this approach in South Africa and Nigeria, with further expansion planned. The aim is to build a comparable body of evidence across Africa, and this will reveal which campaign patterns travel across contexts, and which remain country-specific. Furthermore, it will show how political power is actually competed for in different electoral environments.

The ballot delivers the outcome. The campaign tells the story of how that outcome became possible. That is why Political Campaign Watch matters.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Delta Milayo Ndou'.

Dr. Delta Milayo Ndou
Executive Lead
Political Campaigns Resource Hub