



POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS
RESOURCE HUB

Zambia's Missing Voter

A Comparative Analysis of the 2021 and 2026 Presidential Elections

Campaign analysis focused on registration growth, turnout, abstention and electoral mobilisation

This analysis examines Zambia's 2026 presidential election through the "missing voter" lens. For campaign purposes, the missing voter has two dimensions: (1) registered voters who do not turn out, and (2) eligible citizens who never enter the voter register. The first can be measured directly from election data; the second requires demographic and registration estimates.

Executive finding

The defining electoral shift between 2021 and 2026 may not have been voters moving from one party to another. It was the dramatic growth of voters outside actual participation. Zambia added roughly 1.76 million registered voters, yet total ballots cast increased only marginally. The registered non-voting population consequently expanded sharply.

1. The numbers at a glance

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 pts
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 pts

Core observation: the voter register grew by about 25%, but total participation barely moved. At aggregate level, for every 100 additional names added to the register, total votes cast increased by only about four. This is not a cohort-tracking calculation, but it demonstrates how registration growth was largely absorbed by declining turnout.



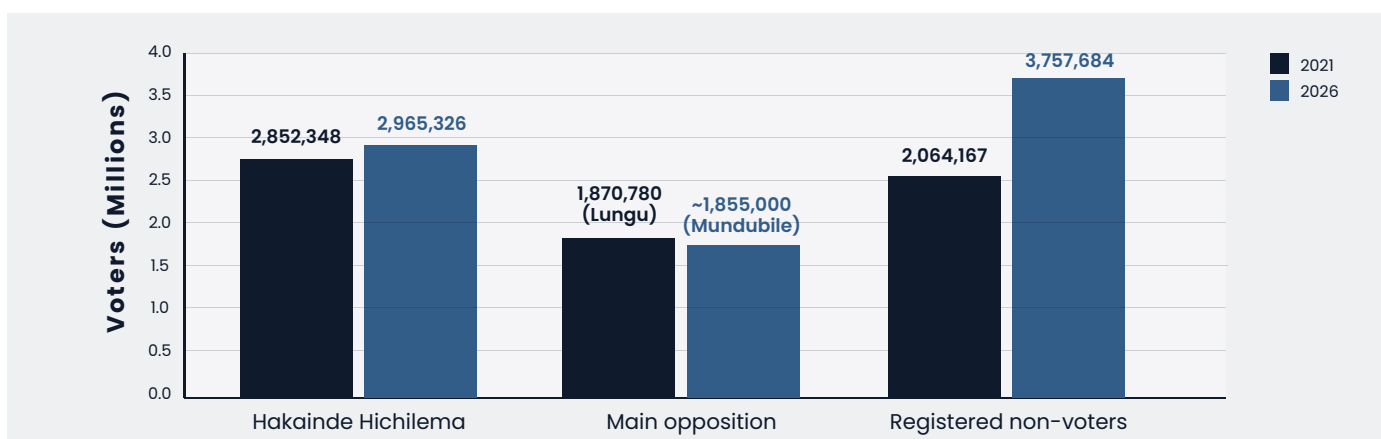
2. The registered missing voter increased dramatically

In 2021, 7,023,499 people were registered and 4,959,332 ballots were cast. This leaves approximately 2,064,167 registered voters who did not participate.

Using the 2026 register of 8,786,300 and approximately 5,028,616 ballots cast, the registered non-voting population rises to approximately 3,757,684.

That is an increase of approximately 1.69 million registered non-voters in a single electoral cycle, or roughly 82% compared with 2021.

3. Compare the missing voter with the candidates



The 2026 registered missing-voter population is larger than Hichilema's winning vote and roughly twice the principal opposition candidate's vote. This does not undermine the legitimacy of the result; elections are decided by valid ballots cast. It does, however, fundamentally alter the campaign-strategy question.

4. Winning more votes does not necessarily mean expanding electoral reach

Hichilema's absolute vote increased by about 113,000, or roughly 4%, while the registered electorate expanded by about 1.76 million, or roughly 25%.

Measured against the entire registered electorate, Hichilema's 2021 vote represented approximately 40.61% of registered voters. Using the stated 2026 total of 2,965,326, his vote represents approximately 33.75% of the 2026 register.

This is an important campaign distinction: a candidate can increase both absolute votes and share of votes cast while simultaneously commanding a smaller share of the total registered electorate when turnout falls.



5. The opposition story is equally revealing

The principal opposition vote appears remarkably close to its 2021 level despite the registered electorate growing by approximately 1.76 million. At aggregate level, neither major political formation appears to have converted the expanding register into comparable growth in its absolute vote.

The most important movement may therefore have been from participation to abstention, rather than simply from UPND to the opposition or from the opposition to UPND.

6. The missing voter before election day

The second layer is the eligible but unregistered citizen. For 2021, ECZ used a ZamStats projection of approximately 8,414,840 eligible voters against 7,023,499 registered voters, implying about 1.39 million eligible people outside the register.

Ahead of the 2026 election, ECZ indicated that it was targeting an estimated 3.5 million eligible voters for new registration. The eventual certified register reached 8,786,300. The exact number of eligible-but-unregistered citizens in 2026 should not be inferred from a simple subtraction because demographic eligibility, citizenship, deaths, duplicate removal and register maintenance affect the denominator. Nevertheless, the evidence points to a substantial population outside the register.

7. Zambia effectively has three electoral populations

The voters: Approximately 5.03 million people who turned out and determined the election.

The registered missing voters: Approximately 3.76 million registered voters who did not cast a ballot.

The eligible but unregistered: A further population of citizens potentially eligible to participate but absent from the register.

8. The youth question

The strategic importance of the missing voter becomes even greater if younger voters are disproportionately represented among abstainers. Registration answers the administrative question, “Can I vote?” Campaign mobilisation must answer the political question, “Why should I vote?” These are different problems requiring different interventions.



9. What campaigns should investigate next

- Map turnout decline from 2021 to 2026 by province, constituency, ward and polling district.
- Identify areas where the voter register grew fastest but actual turnout stagnated or declined.
- Disaggregate the missing voter by age and, where possible, gender and geography.
- Separate registration failure from mobilisation failure.
- Use survey research to understand whether abstention reflects satisfaction, disillusionment, weak opposition, economic frustration, logistical barriers or campaign irrelevance.
- Overlay turnout data with campaign activity and resource deployment to test which tactics actually moved participation.

Conclusion

The biggest electoral constituency in Zambia may not belong to either major political formation. It may be the citizens who stayed home or never entered the register. Between 2021 and 2026, the registered missing-voter population appears to have grown from roughly 2.06 million to 3.76 million. That is a campaign problem of enormous scale.

The strategic question for the next electoral cycle is therefore not only, “How do we persuade voters to choose us?” It is also, “How do we identify, understand, register, persuade and mobilise millions of citizens who are increasingly outside electoral participation?”



Data note and sources

- *The 2026 election was extremely recent at the time of analysis. Detailed figures should be reconciled against ECZ's final downloadable national and constituency-level results before publication or formal research use.
- Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ), 2021 Presidential Results per Constituency.
 - Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ), 2021 Voter Registration Statistics Summary.
 - Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ), certified 2026 Register of Voters / polling district listing.
 - Electoral Commission of Zambia statements on the 2026 voter registration exercise.
 - Contemporary reporting of the 2026 presidential result and ballots cast.

