

Voices of Sacrifice and State Legitimacy: Comparative Dynamics of Veterans' Activism in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United State

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ABSTRACT

The study set out to examine the platforms and mechanisms of veterans' activism and the outcomes and impacts across Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States. The purpose was to understand how veterans, as pivotal actors, shape governance, legitimacy, and policy. Guided by Weberian theories of legitimacy and Migdal's "state in society" framework, the research employed qualitative methods, drawing on key informant interviews and documentary analysis to triangulate evidence. The study concluded that war veterans across the contexts are central agents in shaping governance, legitimacy, and policy through diverse platforms, coercive occupations, party-linked associations, NGOs, media, and lobbying, whose influence is shaped by regime type and institutional openness. Their activism has produced stabilizing impacts when accommodated inclusively, destabilizing effects when repressed, and transformative outcomes when governments were compelled to confront structural inequalities. Therefore veterans are not passive welfare recipients but active agents of change whose activism oscillates between autonomy and capture, reshaping welfare systems, policy frameworks, and legitimacy. The overarching implication is that the stability and consolidation of democracy depend on how states engage veterans: repression or instrumentalization erodes legitimacy, while inclusive recognition strengthens governance, consolidates democracy, and transforms policy.

Veterans' activism is therefore an unavoidable force in state–society relations, and inclusive engagement is essential for stable, legitimate, and democratic governance. To strengthen governance, legitimacy, and policy outcomes in relation to veterans' activism, governments should design welfare schemes that are comprehensive, transparent, and inclusive, ensuring equitable benefits that reduce patronage and reinforce legitimacy. While institutionalizing veterans into formal structures can stabilize governance, policies must safeguard autonomy by allowing independent platforms for grievances without political capture. States should engage veterans as legitimate partners in policymaking, incorporating their voices into national development strategies rather than treating them as instruments of patronage or repression, and prioritize dialogue and negotiation over coercion to maintain trust and democratic consolidation. NGOs and civil society organizations must be recognized as critical partners in amplifying veterans' voices, supporting welfare, and fostering reintegration, particularly in fragile democracies. Veterans should be supported to professionalize activism through lobbying, media engagement, and policy advocacy to ensure constructive influence on governance. Responsive policies that address socio-economic needs while reinforcing democratic values are essential to transform activism into a stabilizing and transformative force. States should adapt lessons from comparative experiences to strengthen governance in their own contexts, recognizing that inclusive engagement with veterans is vital for legitimacy, stability, and democratic consolidation

Keywords: Veterans' activism, Governance, Legitimacy, Policy, State–society relations

INTRODUCTION

Few issues in contemporary political sociology capture the tension between sacrifice, legitimacy, and state power as vividly as the voices of war veterans. Their interventions are not merely nostalgic echoes of past struggles but living forces that continue to shape governance, policy, and public discourse. Veterans embody a moral authority derived from their service, and when they speak, societies are compelled to listen, whether in the United States, where dissenting veterans challenge foreign policy decisions, or in Zimbabwe and South Africa, where liberation war veterans remind governments of unfinished promises. The importance of this issue lies in its ability to reveal how states negotiate legitimacy with those who once fought to establish or defend them, and how veterans' voices can either stabilize or destabilize political orders.

According to Higate and Henry (2021), veterans' activism represents a form of political capital that transcends ordinary citizenship, rooted in sacrifice and collective memory. Validating this, Lembcke (2019) demonstrates how Vietnam veterans reshaped U.S. public opinion by contesting official narratives of war, thereby influencing democratic discourse. In the African context, Kriger (2003) and more recently Chisaka (2022) highlight how Zimbabwean war veterans pressured the Mugabe regime into radical land reform, altering agrarian structures and entrenching authoritarianism. Similarly, Sithole (2021) shows that South African MK veterans have acted as moral guardians, intervening in debates on corruption and inequality. These cases validate the centrality of veterans' voices in shaping governance, though they also reveal gaps in comparative analysis across different national contexts.

In developed democracies, veterans' activism has often been institutionalized within structured frameworks that balance recognition of service with democratic accountability. According to Brooke-Holland et al. (2025), the United Kingdom's Armed Forces Covenant and the establishment of the Office for Veterans' Affairs illustrate how veterans' voices are embedded in law and policy, influencing decisions on housing, healthcare, and social services. Veterans' organizations in the UK have also shaped parliamentary debates on overseas operations, leading to legislation that limits prosecutions for historic military actions. This institutionalization contrasts with contexts where veterans' activism is more coercive, highlighting the importance of structured platforms for veterans' voices.

Furthermore, Canada and Germany provide additional examples of institutionalized veterans' activism. Duel et al. (2019) note that Canadian veterans have historically influenced policy on pensions and rehabilitation, with recent reforms emphasizing mental health support and reintegration. Germany, meanwhile, has integrated veterans' voices into broader civil-military relations, emphasizing reconciliation and remembrance while ensuring that veterans' associations contribute to debates on defense policy. These cases demonstrate how veterans' activism can be harnessed constructively, offering lessons for countries where veterans' voices remain contested. Adding on, veterans in developed democracies often act as advocates for peace and diplomacy. In the UK, veterans' advocacy has influenced parliamentary debates on overseas operations, leading to legislation limiting prosecutions for historic military actions (House of Commons Library, 2025). These practices demonstrate how veterans' voices can be harnessed constructively, offering beacons of good practice for other contexts.

On the African continent, veterans' activism is often rooted in liberation struggles, with their voices continuing to shape governance and legitimacy. Dzinesa (2024) argues that veterans across Southern Africa embody both stabilizing and destabilizing potential: while they can act as agents of reconciliation, they also risk perpetuating violence if marginalized. Namibia provides a notable example, where veterans have been central to debates on pensions and land redistribution. The government institutionalized their welfare through the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, ensuring that their voices are recognized within governance structures. In Mozambique, veterans continue to shape national identity and youth mobilization. UNESCO's HERstory project (2023) highlights the role of women veterans in liberation struggles, emphasizing their contributions to national identity and reconciliation. Veterans' organizations in Mozambique have influenced debates on governance and development, particularly by emphasizing the role of women in liberation struggles.

This demonstrates how veterans' activism can be harnessed constructively, contributing to national identity and reconciliation. Angola provides another example of veterans' activism, where veterans remain influential in post-conflict governance. Veterans often mediate between the state and communities in reintegration programs, ensuring that their voices are recognized within governance structures. This demonstrates how veterans' activism can be harnessed constructively, contributing to post-conflict governance and reconciliation. These continental examples provide a broader lens for understanding Zimbabwe and South Africa, situating their veterans within a regional pattern of contested legitimacy and evolving influence.

In the USA, veterans' activism is embedded in democratic institutions. Lembcke (2019) highlighted Vietnam veterans' role in reshaping public opinion, while Kleykamp & Hipes (2020) analyzed Iraq and Afghanistan veterans' influence through organizations like VoteVets. More recently, veterans have advocated for "smart power," combining military strength with diplomacy and development (USGLC, 2023). Veterans of the War on Terror now occupy congressional seats, using their experiences to influence foreign policy debates (Lantis, 2022). Their activism illustrates how veterans' voices can be institutionalized within pluralistic frameworks, contrasting with the coercive or factionalized activism seen in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Adding on, the Iran conflict of 2026 illustrates the continued relevance of veterans' dissent, as their opposition to escalation resonates with broader public concerns. Unlike in Zimbabwe and South Africa, U.S. veterans operate in a context where their voices are protected by constitutional freedoms, allowing them to contest government policy without fear of repression. This demonstrates how veterans' activism can be harnessed constructively, contributing to democratic discourse and governance.

South African veterans, particularly those from Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), have acted as moral guardians of the liberation legacy. Sithole (2021) argues that MK veterans have consistently reminded the ANC of its liberation mandate, intervening in debates on corruption and inequality. The MK Military Veterans' Association (MKMVA), though controversial, influenced ANC politics during the Zuma era, aligning with factions and mobilizing grassroots support. More recently, disgruntled MK veterans have even formed splinter parties, reflecting their contested legitimacy and ongoing influence in national politics. Furthermore, MK veterans have influenced debates on land expropriation and economic justice, reflecting the unfinished business of liberation. Gumede (2020) notes that veterans have intervened in debates on corruption and inequality, often aligning with factions within the ANC. Their voices resonate in discussions on land expropriation and economic justice, reflecting the unfinished business of liberation. Yet, their legitimacy is contested by younger activists who argue that veterans' dominance perpetuates generational inequality. This tension highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of veterans' voices in democratic consolidation.

In Zimbabwe, war veterans have historically wielded immense influence, particularly during the land reform era. Kriger (2003) demonstrated how veterans' mobilization reshaped agrarian structures, while Alexander and McGregor (2005) highlighted their role in entrenching authoritarianism. More recently, government initiatives such as the Ministry of Veterans of Affairs and empowerment schemes have institutionalized their role in governance (Herald, 2024). Yet, as Maringira (2017) notes, their militarization of politics blurred the line between civilian governance and military authority, undermining democratic institutions. Veterans remain central to electoral mobilization, with ZANU-PF relying on their grassroots networks for legitimacy. Adding on, veterans continue to influence electoral politics and rural governance, often acting as intermediaries between the state and communities. However, their dominance has generated tensions with younger activists who question the continued relevance of liberation credentials. This struggle over legitimacy illustrates the unresolved nature of veterans' activism in Zimbabwe, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of their role in governance.

Based on the above indeed, war veterans' voices have historically shaped government decisions worldwide, but their influence varies across contexts, ranging from coercive mobilization in Zimbabwe, moral guardianship in South Africa, to pluralistic advocacy in the USA. However, other contexts such as the UK, Canada, and Germany provide contrasting models of institutionalized veteran engagement, offering lessons for comparative analysis. Few questions in political sociology are as compelling as the one this study raises: how do war veterans, armed with the moral authority of sacrifice, shape government decisions across different contexts? Veterans' voices are not passive recollections of past struggles; they are active

interventions that continue to influence governance, legitimacy, and policy. Therefore this study aim to understand how veterans, armed with the moral authority of sacrifice and historical legitimacy, intervene in governance processes, shape policy outcomes, and contest state narratives. It focuses on two interrelated dimensions: The platforms veterans use to voice their concerns and the outcomes of veterans' activism, whether stabilizing, destabilizing, or transformative. Ultimately, the research aims to illuminate how veterans' voices continue to shape governance in the 21st century, offering insights into the evolving relationship between sacrifice, legitimacy, and state power.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology, guided by an abductive reasoning approach that allowed for the iterative movement between empirical evidence and theoretical interpretation. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative designs are particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena where context, meaning, and lived experiences are central. In this case, the design was an explanatory case study, chosen to provide depth and contextual richness across three national settings, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States, while allowing for comparative insights. The abductive orientation was critical, as it enabled the researcher to refine emerging themes by oscillating between data and theory, ensuring that findings were both grounded and interpretively robust.

Data collection relied on two complementary methods: key informant interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, complemented by documentary analysis. A total of thirty (30) interviews were conducted across Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States to ensure both comparative breadth and contextual depth, allowing the study to capture diverse national experiences while maintaining analytical richness. The study utilised purposive sampling to identify participants directly involved in or affected by veterans' activism and government decision-making. The categories included veterans serving in government, political leadership, and in the military as well as those who retired who served in these capacities, leaders of veterans' associations, civil society actors, and retired veterans in communities. The characteristics of participants reflected the heterogeneity of veterans' activism across national contexts. In Zimbabwe, participants included war veterans who had transitioned into political leadership positions, those embedded in civic organisations advocating for welfare and land rights, and those opposing aspects of government policy, particularly around authoritarian consolidation. In South Africa, participants included former Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) veterans serving in government and political party structures, veterans active in civic organisations such as the MK Military Veterans' Association, and those who had become critical voices opposing corruption and inequality. In the United States, participants included veterans who had served in the military and continued to serve in official capacities, those who had entered political leadership roles, those active in civic organisations such as VoteVets and IAVA. Purposive sampling was complemented by snowball techniques, whereby initial interviewees' recommended additional participants, particularly within civil society networks. Islam and Aldaihani (2021) has noted that purposive and snowball sampling are particularly effective in qualitative research when the aim is to access "information-rich cases" that illuminate complex social phenomena. This ensured that both elite and grassroots perspectives were captured.

Representativeness was achieved through the principle of data saturation, rather than numerical thresholds. Saturation was observed around the twelfth interview in each country, when no new themes were emerging. However, additional interviews were conducted to ensure robustness and to capture divergent perspectives, particularly from marginalized voices within veterans' movements. Subedi (2021) underscores that qualitative representativeness derives from diversity and saturation rather than statistical generalizability, and the inclusion of varied participant categories in this study aligns with that principle. While purposive and snowball sampling maximise contextual richness, they also carry the risk of bias by privileging accessible or well-connected participants. To mitigate this, efforts were made to include both supportive and critical voices, ensuring that veterans' activism was analysed not only from the perspective of state-aligned actors but also from dissenting and oppositional stakeholders. This reflexive approach aligns with Lincoln and Guba's criteria of trustworthiness, particularly credibility and confirmability, which require researchers to demonstrate that findings are not merely the product of selective sampling but reflect the broader

dynamics of the phenomenon.

Document analysis focused on five key texts: Zimbabwe's War Veterans Act (1992), South Africa's Military Veterans Act (2011), the United States' GI Bill (1944, with subsequent amendments), the African Union's Policy Framework on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (2006), and the UK's Armed Forces Covenant (2011). These documents were purposively selected because they represent seminal policy frameworks that institutionalize veterans' voices and welfare, while also reflecting different trajectories of state–veteran relations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was anchored on two complementary theories that illuminated the role of veterans' voices in shaping governance and legitimacy. Firstly, Stakeholder Theory, originally articulated by Freeman (1984) and later expanded by Miles (2017), was used to understand veterans as critical stakeholders in the political process. Veterans, by virtue of their sacrifice and historical role, held unique legitimacy that compelled governments to engage with their demands. Veterans' associations, advocacy groups, and grassroots mobilizations were interpreted as stakeholder interventions, pressing governments to account for their welfare, recognition, and policy preferences. Stakeholder Theory therefore framed veterans not as passive beneficiaries of state policy but as active participants whose voices were considered in governance decisions. Secondly, the study was informed by Social Contract Theory, rooted in the classical works of Rousseau (1762) and Hobbes (1651), but extended in modern political sociology to explain the reciprocal obligations between citizens and the state. Veterans, having fulfilled their part of the contract through military service and sacrifice, expected governments to honour their obligations by providing welfare, recognition, and inclusion in decision-making. To this effect, Rawls (1999) and Lessig (2020) emphasized that legitimacy in governance was sustained when states upheld their commitments to those who had defended or established them. The Social Contract Theory therefore helped in analysing why veterans' voices carried moral weight and why their exclusion or marginalization often led to contestation, instability, or demands for reform.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in comparative analysis, defined as the systematic examination of similarities and differences across cases to generate theoretical insights into social and political phenomena (Ragin, 2021). The analytical framework for this study was anchored in comparative analysis, defined as the systematic examination of similarities and differences across cases to generate theoretical insights into social and political phenomena. Comparative analysis is particularly valuable in contexts where actors, such as war veterans, operate across diverse political systems, because it enables the identification of causal mechanisms that are contingent on institutional and historical variation. Ragin (2021) explains that comparative frameworks allow researchers to move beyond single-case narratives by situating findings within broader patterns of variation, thereby enhancing both explanatory depth and theoretical generalizability. The comparative framework was employed to interrogate how veterans' activism influences governance and legitimacy in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States, three cases selected to maximize diversity in regime type, institutional openness, and historical trajectories. This approach ensured that veterans' activism is not examined in isolation but as part of a broader spectrum of state–society relations, where sacrifice and legitimacy are negotiated differently depending on political structures.

The framework also integrated Weberian theories of legitimacy and Migdal's "state in society" approach into the comparative design. Weber's typology of legitimacy, traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational, provides a lens for understanding how veterans derive authority from sacrifice and historical struggle, while Migdal's framework emphasizes the contested nature of state power within society and the role of social actors in shaping governance outcomes. This allowed the study to test their explanatory power beyond single-case analysis. For instance, Zimbabwe on how veterans' charismatic legitimacy was mobilized to entrench guided democracy, South Africa on how veterans' moral authority interacts with democratic institutions, and the United States on how legal-rational legitimacy channels activism into structured

advocacy. Mahoney and Thelen (2021) argue, comparative frameworks are most effective when they account for institutional variation and historical contingency, ensuring that findings are not homogenized but sensitive to context. This analytical framework therefore justified the comparative scope of the study which positions veterans' activism as a dynamic force that both reflects and reshapes the relationship between sacrifice, legitimacy, and governance across diverse political systems.

The comparative scope which is, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States was deliberately chosen. The criteria for case selection were grounded in both theoretical relevance and empirical diversity. Zimbabwe and South Africa represent post-liberation societies where veterans' voices are deeply embedded in the unfinished business of decolonization, land reform, and guided democratic consolidation. In contrast, the United States represents a mature democracy where veterans' activism is institutionalized within pluralistic frameworks, offering a counterpoint to the coercive or factionalized activism observed in African contexts. This was for purposes of showing how sacrifice and legitimacy are negotiated differently depending on regime type, historical trajectory, and institutional openness.

The first criterion for case selection was historical significance of veterans in state formation and legitimacy. In Zimbabwe, war veterans were central to the liberation struggle and later to radical land reform, making their activism inseparable from questions of governance and guided democracy consolidation. In South Africa, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) veterans embody the moral guardianship of the liberation legacy, intervening in debates on corruption, inequality, and unfinished promises of transformation. In the United States, veterans have historically shaped democratic discourse, from Vietnam-era dissent to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans influencing foreign policy through organizations such as VoteVets. The cases allowed the study to compare contexts where veterans are foundational to state legitimacy (Zimbabwe and South Africa) with one where veterans' activism is embedded in constitutional freedoms and institutionalized advocacy (United States).

The second criterion was variation in regime type and institutional openness. Zimbabwe represents a hybrid authoritarian regime where veterans' activism oscillates between autonomy and capture, often mobilized coercively to sustain ruling party dominance. Zimbabwe is widely categorized as a hybrid regime, combining elements of democracy and authoritarianism, to make guided democracy. According to Makone and Lambrechts (2021) Zimbabwe between 1990 and 2018 exhibited multiple forms of hybridity, liberal, competitive illiberal, competitive authoritarian, and military tutelary regimes, depending on electoral cycles and elite cohesion. Indicators such as military tutelage, and limited horizontal accountability underpin its classification as hybrid authoritarian. This fluid hybridity explains why veterans' activism in Zimbabwe oscillates between autonomy and capture, often mobilized coercively to sustain ruling party dominance.

South Africa, while a constitutional democracy, demonstrates contested legitimacy, with veterans simultaneously reinforcing liberation credentials and challenging corruption within the ANC. South Africa is formally a constitutional democracy, established in 1994 with strong institutions such as the Independent Electoral Commission and a rights-based constitution. However, scholars highlight its contested legitimacy. Mhlongo (2021) notes that while South Africa's system guarantees electoral participation and accountability, corruption scandals and factionalism within the ANC undermine institutional integrity. Levy et al. (2021) further argue that South Africa's democracy is strained by massive inequality colliding with strong institutions, producing tensions that weaken legitimacy. Thus, South Africa is categorized as a democracy, but one where veterans' activism reflects unresolved contradictions between liberation credentials and democratic accountability.

The United States, by contrast, exemplifies a pluralistic democracy where veterans' activism is channelled through structured platforms such as lobbying, media engagement, and congressional representation. The United States is classified as a pluralistic democracy, characterized by constitutional freedoms, competitive elections, and institutionalized advocacy. Pew Research Center's 2021 typology highlights the deep partisan polarization but affirms that the U.S. political system remains pluralistic, with diverse ideological coalitions and structured mechanisms for representation. Veterans' activism in this context is channelled through formal institutions such as Congress, lobbying organizations, and media advocacy, rather than coercive

mobilization. This institutional openness explains why veterans' voices in the U.S. are stabilizing and policy-oriented, contrasting sharply with the factionalized activism in Zimbabwe and South Africa

The third criterion was comparative relevance for theory-building. Through juxtaposing African liberation contexts with a developed democracy, the study sought to test the applicability of Weberian legitimacy and Migdal's "state in society" framework across diverse settings. Zimbabwe and South Africa illustrate how veterans' activism can destabilize or reinforce legitimacy depending on state responses, while the United States demonstrates how institutionalization can transform activism into a stabilizing force. Addressing contextual differences required careful attention to historical trajectories: in Zimbabwe, the marginalization of veterans in the 1980s sowed grievances that later radicalized; in South Africa, veterans' contested legitimacy reflects generational tensions within a democratic framework; in the United States, and activism is shaped by constitutional freedoms and institutional safeguards.

The study also addressed contextual differences by embedding local voices and policy frameworks into the comparative analysis. In Zimbabwe, interviews and documentary analysis focused on the War Veterans Act and land reform policies; in South Africa, the Military Veterans Act and ANC factional politics were central; in the United States, the GI Bill and veterans' lobbying organizations provided the institutional lens. This grounding of each case in its own policy frameworks and socio-political dynamics, the study ensured that comparisons were not abstract but empirically anchored.

War Veterans In Zimbabwe From 1980 Onwards

The trajectory of Zimbabwe's war veterans from 1980 onwards has been marked by distinct phases, each of which has attracted scholarly attention and generated debates about their role in shaping governance, legitimacy, and state-society relations. This study reviews the literature chronologically, showing how veterans' voices evolved from marginalization in the 1980s, to radicalization in the late 1990s, to electoral mobilization in the 2000s, to institutionalization in the 2010s, and finally to contested legitimacy in the post-2017 era, culminating in recent controversies such as Constitutional Amendment Bill No. 3 (CAB 3) and the Geza issue.

In the 1980s, veterans were largely marginalized despite their central role in the liberation struggle, and the literature on this period consistently highlights the paradox of symbolic recognition without substantive welfare provision. Kriger (1995) and Ranger (1985) observed that the new state celebrated veterans rhetorically but failed to integrate them into meaningful economic or social structures, leaving many economically vulnerable and socially excluded. Raftopoulos (2000) argued that this neglect created a reservoir of grievances that later became politicized, while Moore (2005), writing from outside Zimbabwe, situated this within a continental pattern where liberation heroes were sidelined after independence. The convergence among these scholars lies in their recognition of veterans' marginalization, but the contradiction emerges in their interpretations of its implications: while Kriger emphasized the seeds of later activism, Moore stressed the broader African pattern of exclusion. This study interprets the 1980s as a foundational period, where exclusion sowed the seeds of later activism, shaping veterans' trajectory as both autonomous actors and instruments of state power.

Critically, the literature on the 1980s reveals that veterans' marginalization was not merely an oversight but a structural feature of post-independence governance. Scholars such as Ranger (1985) emphasized the symbolic recognition of veterans, while Raftopoulos (2000) highlighted the economic neglect that created grievances. Moore (2005) reinforced this view by situating Zimbabwe within a broader African pattern of exclusion. This study interprets these contradictions as evidence of the duality of veterans' marginalization: they were both symbolically recognized and materially excluded, and this duality is central to understanding their later activism. The 1980s therefore illustrate the complexity of veterans' marginalization, which cannot be reduced to either recognition or exclusion. Instead, their activism was shaped by both symbolic recognition and economic neglect, and this duality is central to understanding their role in Zimbabwe's political trajectory.

By the 1990s, the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA) emerged as a

powerful platform for veterans' voices, and the literature on this period highlights both their autonomy and their co-optation. Kriger (2003) portrayed veterans as autonomous actors demanding pensions, culminating in the 1997 payouts. Alexander and McGregor (2005), however, contradicted this autonomy thesis, stressing ZANU-PF's strategic co-optation of veterans to shore up legitimacy amid growing opposition. Raftopoulos (2019) bridged these perspectives, suggesting veterans' activism was both grievance-driven and politically instrumental. This study interprets the 1990s as a turning point, where autonomy and co-optation coexisted, and shaping veterans' dual role as grassroots actors and instruments of state power.

The literature on the 1990s reveals that veterans' activism was both autonomous and co-opted, and this duality is central to understanding their role in Zimbabwe's political trajectory. Scholars such as Kriger (2003) emphasized veterans' grievances and agency, while Alexander and McGregor (2005) stressed manipulation and co-optation. Raftopoulos (2019) bridged these perspectives, suggesting veterans' activism was both grievance-driven and politically instrumental. This study interprets these contradictions as evidence of the duality of veterans' activism: they were both autonomous actors and instruments of the state. The 1990s therefore illustrate the complexity of veterans' activism, which cannot be reduced to either autonomy or co-optation. Instead, their activism was shaped by both grievances and political manipulation, and this duality is central to understanding their role in Zimbabwe's political trajectory.

The late 1990s and early 2000s marked the radicalization of veterans during land reform, and the literature on this period is both rich and deeply contested. Raftopoulos (2009) and Sachikonye (2011) emphasized that veterans spearheaded farm invasions, reshaping agrarian structures and entrenching ZANU-PF's dominance. Their work highlighted the veterans' ability to mobilize rural communities and to translate liberation credentials into direct political action. Kriger (2003), however, interpreted this activism as evidence of autonomy, stressing that veterans acted independently of the state to reclaim land they believed was rightfully theirs. Alexander and McGregor (2005) contradicted this view, arguing that veterans were mobilized by ZANU-PF to suppress opposition and legitimize radical land redistribution. Maringira (2017) added another dimension, showing how veterans embedded in the army militarized politics, blurring civilian and military authority. Hammar and Raftopoulos (2003) reinforced coercive interpretations, portraying veterans as instruments of state violence rather than autonomous actors. The land reform was therefore both grievance expression and authoritarian consolidation, recognizing that veterans' activism was simultaneously a response to economic marginalization and a tool for sustaining ZANU-PF's dominance.

Critically, the literature converges on the recognition that veterans were central to land reform, but it diverges on their motivations and autonomy. Scholars such as Kriger (2003) emphasized veterans' grievances and agency, while Alexander and McGregor (2005) stressed manipulation and co-optation. Maringira (2017) and Hammar & Raftopoulos (2003) reinforced the coercive dimension, portraying veterans as instruments of authoritarian consolidation. These contradictions are evidence of the duality of veterans' activism: they were both autonomous actors and instruments of the state. The land reform era therefore illustrates the complexity of veterans' voices, which cannot be reduced to either autonomy or co-optation. Instead, their activism was shaped by both genuine grievances and political manipulation, and this duality is central to understanding their role in Zimbabwe's political trajectory.

In the 2000s, veterans became central to electoral mobilization, and the literature on this period highlights both their grassroots influence and their coercive practices. Moyo (2021) argued that veterans' grassroots networks were crucial for ZANU-PF's electoral dominance, converging with Alexander and McGregor's emphasis on rural mobilization. Yet, Kriger's autonomy thesis was contradicted, as veterans' networks were often mobilized through coercion and patronage. Sachikonye (2011) highlighted the violent dimensions of veterans' activism, noting their role in intimidation during elections. This perspective converged with Maringira's militarization thesis but contradicted Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) portrayal of veterans as moral authorities. The 2000s was therefore a period where veterans' electoral role was real but compromised by authoritarian practices, raising questions about the authenticity of their grassroots legitimacy.

The literature converges on the recognition that veterans were central to electoral mobilization, but it diverges on their legitimacy. Moyo (2021) and Alexander & McGregor (2005) emphasized that veterans'

grassroots networks, while Sachikonye (2011) and Maringira (2017) highlighted coercion and violence. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) contradicted these views, portraying veterans as moral authorities whose voices carried symbolic weight. This is evidence of the contested nature of veterans' legitimacy: they were both grassroots mobilizers and coercive actors, and their role in electoral politics was shaped by both moral authority and authoritarian practices. The 2000s therefore illustrate the complexity of veterans' electoral activism, which cannot be reduced to either legitimacy or coercion. Instead, their activism was shaped by both symbolic authority and coercive practices, and this duality is central to understanding their role in Zimbabwe's political trajectory.

The 2010s saw institutionalization through policy frameworks, and the literature on this period highlights both accommodation and manipulation. The War Veterans Act (1992) and the Ministry of Veterans Affairs institutionalized welfare but tied veterans to ZANU-PF. Chisaka (2022) argued these initiatives were both accommodative and manipulative, providing benefits while ensuring loyalty. These state responses can be interpreted as ambivalent, oscillating between welfare provision and authoritarian patronage. The literature converges on the recognition that state policies addressed veterans' grievances, but it diverges on their motivations. Chisaka (2022) emphasized that accommodation, while others stressed manipulation and co-optation. These contradictions are evidence of the ambivalence of state responses: they were both welfare-oriented and politically manipulative, and this duality is central to understanding veterans' role in Zimbabwe's political trajectory. Therefore, literature on the 2010s reveals that veterans' activism was increasingly institutionalized, but their legitimacy was contested. This illustrates the complexity of veterans' institutionalization, which cannot be reduced to either accommodation or manipulation. Instead, their activism was shaped by both welfare provision and authoritarian patronage, and this duality is central to understanding their role in Zimbabwe's political trajectory.

The period after 2017, following Mugabe's ouster, represented a critical epoch on Zimbabwean war veterans, and the literature has been rich in both convergences and contradictions. Chisaka (2022) noted that veterans remained influential in shaping political discourse, but their legitimacy was increasingly contested by younger generations who questioned the continued dominance of liberation credentials. This affirms Muzondidya (2020), who emphasized generational tensions, arguing that younger activists challenged the symbolic authority of veterans by demanding accountability and inclusivity in governance. Both scholars highlighted the erosion of veterans' moral authority, suggesting that their symbolic capital was historically contingent rather than permanent. Yet, this contradicts earlier works by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), which emphasized the enduring symbolic power of liberation credentials as a moral compass for the nation. Therefore, the post-2017 period as one where veterans' symbolic authority was eroding, not because it was absent, but because it was increasingly contested by new political actors and shifting social expectations. The literature therefore reveals a tension between continuity and rupture: while veterans remained visible, their legitimacy was no longer uncontested, and this shift has profound implications for understanding Zimbabwe's evolving political culture.

The Geza issue further illustrates internal fractures within the veterans' movement and has been studied as emblematic of contested legitimacy. Blessed Runesu Geza, a prominent veteran, openly criticized Mnangagwa's administration, accusing it of corruption and betrayal of liberation values. His dissent revealed fractures within the veterans' alliance with ZANU-PF, highlighting tensions between loyalty and autonomy. Maringira (2017) and Chisaka (2022) noted that Geza's case demonstrated how veterans could be both instruments of the state and challengers of its authority. His death in 2026, widely reported in ZimCitizenNews, underscored the contested legitimacy of veterans in post-2017 politics. This study interprets the Geza issue as emblematic of contested legitimacy and generational tensions within veterans' activism. Critically, Geza's dissent showed that veterans were not a monolithic bloc but a heterogeneous group with divergent views on governance and legitimacy. The literature converges on the recognition of Geza's dissent as significant, but it diverges on its implications: while some scholars saw it as evidence of veterans' autonomy, others interpreted it as symptomatic of deeper fractures within the veterans' movement. This study views the Geza issue as a turning point, revealing that veterans' voices could challenge state authority even as they remained tied to liberation credentials.

Furthermore, veterans' voices also shaped constitutional debates, particularly around Constitutional

Amendment Bill No. 3 (CAB 3). Scholars and legal analysts noted that veterans challenged President Mnangagwa's involvement in CAB 3, arguing it violated constitutional obligations by extending presidential tenure and altering electoral systems. Reports from NewsDay Zimbabwe (2026) and Zimbabwe Situation (2026) highlighted how veterans opposed Mnangagwa, framing CAB 3 as a betrayal of liberation values. The Constitutional Court dismissed their challenge, citing insufficient specificity. The veterans' involvement in CAB 3 as evidence of their continued relevance, though their influence was curtailed by judicial rulings, revealing both their persistence and their limits in shaping constitutional outcomes. The literature converges on the recognition that veterans remained politically active, but it diverges on whether their activism was genuinely autonomous or strategically aligned with factional struggles within ZANU-PF. This study views CAB 3 as a proxy battle in succession politics, where veterans' voices were mobilized to challenge Mnangagwa's authority, but their impact was ultimately constrained by institutional mechanisms.

Taken together, the post-2017 literature reveals a complex picture of veterans' activism. On one hand, Chisaka (2022) and Muzondidya (2020) emphasized contested legitimacy and generational tensions, while on the other, cases such as Geza and CAB 3 demonstrated that veterans remained politically relevant, even if their influence has been increasingly fragmented and constrained. In this regard, post-2017 period as one of both continuity and rupture: veterans continued to shape governance, but their legitimacy was contested, their voices fractured, and their influence limited by institutional and generational dynamics. The literature therefore highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of veterans' activism, one that recognizes both their persistence and their limits in shaping Zimbabwe's evolving political landscape.

Across the different epochs examined in this study, three critical insights emerge that illuminate the complex and contested role of Zimbabwe's war veterans in shaping governance. First, veterans' activism was consistently dual in nature, oscillating between autonomous grievance expression and state manipulation. From the marginalization of the 1980s, through the pension demands of the 1990s, to the radical land reform of the early 2000s, the literature shows that veterans acted both as independent agents voicing genuine socio-economic grievances and as instruments strategically mobilized by ZANU-PF to consolidate power. Second, their legitimacy was historically contingent, rooted in liberation credentials but eroding over time as generational dynamics challenged the moral authority of the liberation struggle. Scholars such as Chisaka (2022) and Muzondidya (2020) emphasized that younger activists increasingly questioned veterans' dominance, while earlier works like Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) had portrayed their symbolic power as enduring. Third, their influence persisted into constitutional debates and internal fractures, as seen in their involvement in Constitutional Amendment Bill No. 3 (CAB 3) and the Geza issue, yet this influence was increasingly constrained by institutional rulings and generational contestations. Therefore veterans' voices as central but contested, shaping Zimbabwe's governance across decades while revealing significant gaps in comparative analysis with other contexts such as South Africa and the United States.

International perspectives situate Zimbabwe within broader debates. Moore (2005) argued that veterans' activism was emblematic of African struggles where liberation credentials were used to justify authoritarianism. Dzinesa (2024), focusing on Southern Africa, emphasized that veterans embodied both stabilizing and destabilizing potential, acting as agents of reconciliation but also perpetuating violence if marginalized. These perspectives converge with Maringira's emphasis on militarization but contradict Kriger's autonomy thesis. Therefore Zimbabwean veterans exemplify continental patterns of liberation legitimacy

South Africa's Post-Apartheid Veterans of War Trajectory

South Africa's post-apartheid trajectory has been deeply shaped by the presence and interventions of former uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) veterans, whose role in the liberation struggle endowed them with symbolic authority but whose place in the democratic order has been fraught with contradictions. The literature consistently portrays MK veterans as both moral guardians of the African National Congress (ANC) and contested actors whose legitimacy has waxed and waned in response to corruption scandals, inequality, and unresolved questions of land redistribution. In the early years of transition, scholars who included; Williams (2000) and Gear (2002) noted that the integration of MK cadres into the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and civilian life was poorly managed, leaving many veterans economically vulnerable

despite their celebrated status as heroes of the struggle. As the ANC consolidated power, veterans increasingly sought to remind the party of its liberation ethos, positioning themselves as custodians of moral authority. Yet, Simelane (2004) and Houston (2007) observed that their interventions were often entangled in factional battles, particularly during the Mbeki–Zuma succession struggle, which undermined their autonomy.

The early 1990s marked the formal disbandment of uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) as South Africa transitioned to democracy, and the literature consistently highlights the challenges of integrating veterans into the new political order. Williams (2000) and Gear (2002) observed that many MK cadres were absorbed into the SANDF or civilian life, but the process was fraught with neglect, poor planning, and limited welfare provision. Veterans were celebrated rhetorically as heroes of the struggle, yet their socio-economic conditions deteriorated, with many living in poverty and unemployment. The convergence among scholars lies in recognizing the neglect of veterans, but contradictions emerge in interpretation: while some emphasize structural failures of integration, others stress the ANC's deliberate side-lining of veterans to consolidate civilian political authority. This study interprets the early 1990s as a foundational epoch, where exclusion sowed grievances that later became politicized, shaping veterans' trajectory as both moral guardians and marginalized actors.

The literature reveals that MK veterans' marginalization was not accidental but structural, embedded in the priorities of a new state focused on reconciliation and economic liberalization rather than addressing liberation grievances. Williams (2000) emphasized the symbolic recognition of veterans, while Gear (2002) highlighted the economic neglect that created grievances. Frankel (2001) reinforced this view by situating South Africa within a broader African pattern of exclusion, where liberation heroes were side-lined after independence. This can serve as evidence of duality; veterans were both symbolically recognized and materially excluded, and this duality is central to understanding their later activism. The early 1990s therefore illustrate the complexity of veterans' marginalization, which cannot be reduced to either recognition or exclusion. Instead, their activism was shaped by both symbolic recognition and economic neglect, and this duality is central to understanding their role in South Africa's political trajectory. The literature on this period converges on the recognition of veterans' marginalization, but it diverges on its implications: while some scholars emphasize the seeds of later activism, others stress the broader African pattern of exclusion. The early 1990s was therefore a foundational epoch, where exclusion sowed grievances that later became politicized, shaping veterans' trajectory as both moral guardians and marginalized actors.

By the 2000s, MK veterans increasingly positioned themselves as moral guardians of the ANC, reminding the party of its liberation ethos and sacrifices. Simelane (2004) and Houston (2007) emphasized that veterans invoked their struggle credentials to critique corruption, factionalism, and the erosion of ANC values. Their interventions carried symbolic weight, as they were seen as custodians of the liberation legacy. Yet, the literature also highlights contradictions, while veterans sought to act as moral guardians, their voices were often instrumentalised in ANC factional battles, particularly during the Mbeki–Zuma succession struggle. Butler (2009) noted that veterans were mobilized by different factions to legitimize their claims to leadership, undermining their autonomy. Therefore, the 2000s was a turning point, where veterans' moral authority was both asserted and manipulated, shaping their dual role as guardians and instruments of factional politics.

Here literature converges on the recognition that veterans were central to ANC politics, but it diverges on their legitimacy. Simelane (2004) emphasized veterans' moral authority, Houston (2007) highlighted their symbolic weight, while Butler (2009) stressed manipulation and co-optation. This is evidence of the contested nature of veterans' legitimacy, they were both moral guardians and factional instruments, and their role in ANC politics was shaped by both symbolic authority and political manipulation. The 2000s therefore illustrate the complexity of veterans' activism, which cannot be reduced to either guardianship or manipulation. Instead, their activism was shaped by both moral authority and factional politics, and this duality is central to understanding their role in South Africa's political trajectory. The literature on the 2000s reveals that MK veterans' activism was both autonomous and co-opted, and this duality is central to understanding their role in South Africa's political trajectory. Simelane (2004) emphasized veterans' grievances and agency, while Butler (2009) stressed manipulation and co-optation. Houston (2007) bridged

these perspectives, suggesting veterans' activism was both grievance-driven and politically instrumental. In this regard, veterans were both autonomous actors and instruments of the state. The 2000s therefore illustrate the complexity of veterans' activism, which cannot be reduced to either autonomy or co-optation. Instead, their activism was shaped by both grievances and political manipulation, and this duality is central to understanding their role in South Africa's political trajectory.

The 2010s saw MK veterans increasingly vocal in debates on corruption, inequality, and institutional failure, particularly within the DMV. Mkhize (2015) and Tshabalala (2018) emphasized that veterans criticized the ANC for betraying liberation values through corruption scandals and failure to deliver socio-economic justice. The collapse of the DMV, marked by procurement scandals and mismanagement, was described as a "betrayal of those who fought for freedom." This period is often portrayed as one where veterans' moral authority was eroded by association with corruption and neglect, undermining their legitimacy. Yet, the literature also highlights contradictions: while veterans critiqued corruption, some were themselves implicated in patronage networks, blurring the line between guardianship and complicity. Therefore, the 2010s was a period where veterans' legitimacy was increasingly contested, shaped by both their critiques of corruption and their entanglement in patronage. This also brings up the recognition that veterans were central to debates on corruption and inequality, but it diverges on their legitimacy. Mkhize (2015) emphasized veterans' critiques of corruption, Tshabalala (2018) highlighted their role in inequality debates, while others stressed their complicity in patronage. This can be evidence of the contested nature of veterans' legitimacy, they were both critics and participants in corruption, and their role in debates on inequality was shaped by both moral authority and complicity. The 2010s therefore illustrate the complexity of veterans' activism, which was not either guardianship or complicity but shaped by both critiques and participation in corruption.

In the 2020s, MK veterans re-entered politics through the MK Party, advancing radical proposals such as expropriation of land without compensation dating back to 1652. Mzwanele Manyi's 2026 bill argued that inequality in South Africa is worse than during apartheid, framing land expropriation as the completion of decolonisation. In the vein, Gumede (2024) and Maluleke (2025) emphasized that veterans' involvement in land debates reflected both their enduring relevance and their contested legitimacy, they were seen by some as champions of justice, but by others as destabilizing actors invoking Zimbabwe-style land grabs. This hence is a period where veterans' activism was both radical and contested, shaping debates on land and inequality. Veterans have been central to land debates, an issue which affected their legitimacy. In literature, Gumede (2024) emphasized veterans' role as champions of justice, Maluleke (2025) highlighted their contested legitimacy, while others warned of destabilization which all points to the contested nature of veterans shaped by both justice and destabilization which are in turn shaped by both radical proposals and contested legitimacy.

A critical review of the South African literature on MK veterans reveals a pattern of duality and contestation that mirrors, yet also diverges from, the Zimbabwean experience. Scholars consistently portray MK veterans as central actors in the post-apartheid political landscape, but their role has been marked by both autonomy and manipulation, moral authority and complicity, guardianship and destabilization. In the early 1990s, the literature emphasizes their marginalization during integration into the SANDF and civilian life, with Williams (2000) and Gear (2002) highlighting poor planning and neglect that left many veterans economically vulnerable despite symbolic recognition. This exclusion sowed grievances that later became politicized, situating veterans as both marginalized actors and potential moral guardians of the ANC. By the 2000s, Simelane (2004) and Houston (2007) stressed veteran's interventions as reminders of liberation values, yet Butler (2009) showed how their voices were instrumentalized in factional battles, undermining autonomy. The 2010s saw Mkhize (2015) and Tshabalala (2018) documenting veterans' critiques of corruption and inequality, while others noted their entanglement in patronage networks, blurring the line between guardianship and complicity. In the 2020s, Gumede (2024) and Maluleke (2025) analysed their re-entry into politics through the MK Party, advancing radical land expropriation proposals that were simultaneously framed as justice and destabilization.

Taken together, the literature converges on three insights; South African MK veterans' activism has been consistently dual, oscillating between grievance expression and factional manipulation; their legitimacy has

been historically contingent, eroding over time as corruption and inequality undermined their symbolic capital; and their influence persists in debates on corruption, inequality, and land expropriation, but is increasingly constrained by institutional failures and contested by broader society. This demonstrates that the MK veterans' voices have been central but contested in South Africa's governance, echoing Zimbabwean patterns while revealing unique dynamics shaped by the ANC's internal politics and South Africa's unresolved socio-economic inequalities.

Veterans of War in America

The Revolutionary War generation established the precedent for veterans as both celebrated heroes and marginalized actors in the American new republic. Higginbotham (1983) and Resch (1999) explained that Revolutionary veterans were central to the symbolic construction of American citizenship, their service conferring legitimacy in debates over governance and civic duty. Organizations like the Society of the Cincinnati sought to preserve the memory of service and maintain elite influence, but they were often accused of aristocratic tendencies, revealing early tensions between veterans as moral guardians and contested actors in a democratic society. Despite their symbolic capital, many veterans faced economic hardship, with pensions and land grants inconsistently delivered, creating grievances that foreshadowed later activism. This honoured rhetorically but neglected materially status set a pattern that would recur across centuries. This relegates veterans of war to both moral guardians of the republic and marginalized actors struggling for recognition. The Revolutionary era therefore illustrates the foundational complexity of veterans' activism, which cannot be reduced to either guardianship or neglect but a status shaped by both symbolic recognition and economic grievance.

The early American republic also reveals how veterans' activism was politicized in debates over democracy and elitism. The Society of the Cincinnati was accused of attempting to establish hereditary privilege, undermining democratic ideals. Yet, veterans also played a crucial role in legitimizing the new state, their service invoked in debates over citizenship and governance which speaks to contested nature of veterans' legitimacy as both celebrated as founders and criticized as elitists, their role shaped by both symbolic authority and political contestation. This revolutionary era therefore illustrates the complexity of veterans' activism, characterised by both celebration and critique shaped by both symbolic authority and political contestation.

The Civil War and Reconstruction (1860s–1890s) era marked another critical epoch, with Union and Confederate veterans shaping both reconciliation and division. McConnell (1992) and Blight (2001) highlight how veterans' organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) became powerful political actors, lobbying for pensions and influencing Republican Party politics. Veterans were framed as moral guardians of the Union, their service legitimizing Reconstruction policies and the expansion of citizenship. However, while Union veterans were celebrated as defenders of democracy, Confederate veterans shaped the "Lost Cause" narrative, embedding themselves in Southern politics and memory framing veterans of war as agents of reconciliation versus perpetrators of division which illustrates the contested legitimacy of Civil War veterans, shaping debates on race, citizenship, and inequality. Hence, veterans in America were central to Reconstruction politics, but it diverges on their legitimacy. McConnell emphasized Union veterans' role as moral guardians, while Blight highlighted Confederate veterans' role in perpetuating division which portrays veterans as both agents of reconciliation and perpetrators of division.

The First and Second World Wars produced massive veteran populations whose activism reshaped American politics and society. Skocpol (1992) and Katznelson (2005) argues that veterans' organizations like the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) became influential lobbying forces, securing pensions, healthcare, and ultimately the GI Bill of 1944. The GI Bill is often described as one of the most transformative pieces of social legislation in U.S. history, embedding veterans into the middle class and fuelling higher education and homeownership. Veterans were celebrated as moral guardians of democracy, their service legitimizing U.S. leadership in global affairs and reinforcing the narrative of America as a defender of freedom. However, while white veterans benefited enormously from the GI Bill, Black veterans faced systemic discrimination in access to housing loans, education, and employment,

revealing inequalities in the distribution of benefits. This illustrates the contested legitimacy of World War veterans.

In this light, the literature converges on the recognition that veterans were central to the expansion of the American welfare state, but it diverges on its implications. Skocpol emphasized the GI Bill as a democratizing force, while Katznelson highlighted racial exclusions that undermined its egalitarian promise. Hence veterans in the USA were both beneficiaries and victims of structural inequality, their role shaped by both symbolic authority and systemic discrimination. The World War era therefore illustrates the complexity of veterans' activism shaped by both symbolic authority and systemic discrimination.

The post-war period also reveals how veterans' activism was politicized in debates over foreign policy and national security. The American Legion and VFW became staunch defenders of U.S. military engagement abroad, framing veterans as moral guardians of democracy. Yet, critics argued that these organizations were complicit in Cold War militarism, legitimizing interventions that perpetuated inequality abroad. Hence during this epoch, veterans in USA were both celebrated as defenders of democracy and criticized as perpetrators of militarism, roles shaped by both symbolic authority and political contestation key in American political development.

The Vietnam Era (1960s–1980s) generation marked a rupture in the narrative of veterans as uncontested moral guardians. Appy (2016) and Lembcke (2018) explained that Vietnam veterans were initially marginalized, returning to a society deeply divided over the war. Many became vocal critics of U.S. foreign policy, with organizations like Vietnam Veterans against the War (VVAW) challenging government narratives and shaping public opinion during the 1970s and 1980s. Their activism was framed as both grievance-driven, addressing neglect, PTSD, and lack of recognition and moral, positioning veterans as truth-tellers against state propaganda. However, while some veterans became symbols of anti-war dissent, others entered mainstream politics, using their service to bolster credibility on national security. This autonomous critique versus institutional co-optation illustrates the contested legitimacy of Vietnam veterans, shaping debates on war, governance, and public trust in USA.

The literature also shows that Vietnam veterans reshaped public discourse. Appy emphasized their role as moral critics, while Lembcke highlighted contested narratives, including myths of veterans being spat on as both moral guardians and contested actors. The Vietnam era also reveals how veterans' activism was politicized in debates over legitimacy and trust. Veterans were celebrated as moral guardians of democracy, but they were also criticized as perpetrators of division, shaped by both symbolic authority and political contestation. This shows the contested nature of veterans' legitimacy who are both celebrated as defenders of democracy and criticized as perpetrators of division, their role shaped by both symbolic authority and political contestation

The post-9/11 generation of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans has been studied extensively for its civic activism and organizational influence. Teigen (2018) and Parker (2021) emphasize that these veterans, unlike their Vietnam predecessors, were often celebrated as heroes upon return, yet they faced profound challenges related to PTSD, suicide, toxic exposure, and reintegration. Organizations such as Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and VoteVets emerged as powerful advocacy platforms, mobilizing veterans around issues of healthcare, employment, and foreign policy accountability. Their activism was framed as both grievance-driven, addressing the lived realities of modern warfare, and moral, positioning veterans as guardians of democracy who demanded accountability from Congress and the executive. However, while these organizations claimed autonomy, they were often aligned with partisan agendas, raising questions about independence versus manipulation. This autonomous grievance expression versus partisan mobilization, illustrates the contested legitimacy of post-9/11 veterans.

The literature shows the recognition that Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were highly engaged in civic life, but it diverges on their motivations. Teigen emphasized grievance-driven activism rooted in lived experiences, while Parker highlighted strategic mobilization by parties seeking to harness veterans' symbolic authority. This shows veterans were both autonomous actors and instruments of political manipulation, their role shaped by both symbolic authority and partisan contestation. Their activism was

shaped by both grievances and political manipulation. The post-9/11 era also reveals how veterans' activism was politicized in debates over foreign policy and national security. Organizations like VoteVets positioned veterans as moral guardians of democracy, critiquing corruption and demanding accountability in congressional debates. Yet, these organizations were complicit in partisan battles, aligning with one party and undermining their autonomy.

The contemporary period (2010s–2020s) has seen veterans increasingly positioned as agents of bipartisanship in a polarized Congress. Amoroso (2025) found that veteran lawmakers were more effective at advancing consequential legislation and more willing to collaborate across party lines, especially those with active duty backgrounds. The formation of caucuses such as the For Country Caucus exemplifies veterans' efforts to restore bipartisanship, invoking military values of duty, teamwork, and mission focus. Veterans are celebrated as moral guardians of democracy, their service legitimizing efforts to rebuild trust in institutions. However, while veterans are celebrated as bipartisan actors, their declining numbers limit their overall influence, and their interventions are often overshadowed by broader partisan divides making veterans constrained actors yet central to bipartisanship. Literature emphasized their legislative successes, while others cautioned that declining representation undermines their impact, this shaped by both symbolic authority and structural decline.

The contemporary era also reveals how veterans' activism has been politicized in debates over inequality, corruption, and social justice. Organizations like IAVA and VoteVets positioned veterans as moral guardians of democracy, critiquing corruption and demanding accountability in congressional debates. Yet, critics argued that these organizations were complicit in partisan battles, aligning with one party and undermining their autonomy. The unfolding Iran conflict has placed U.S. veterans at the center of political and civic debates, echoing earlier epochs where their voices were both autonomous and contested. In Congress, veteran lawmakers have introduced bills to limit presidential war powers, reflecting lessons from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Representative Tom Barrett, an Army veteran, proposed legislation authorizing limited military action until July 30, 2026, while explicitly prohibiting ground troop occupation, nation-building, or long-term stabilization efforts. His framing, "I've lost too many friends on the battlefield to allow that to happen without Congress exercising its constitutional role", underscores how personal sacrifice translates into legislative activism. Regardless, while veterans seek to restrain executive authority, they also authorize continued military operations, reflecting ambivalence between restraint and intervention which mirrors earlier epochs where veterans were both autonomous critics and instruments of state power.

Therefore, veterans' legislative interventions highlight enduring tensions between executive war powers and congressional oversight. Literature has it that veterans' battlefield experiences lend credibility to their critiques, but their proposals often stop short of full disengagement, revealing ambivalence. This study interprets these contradictions as evidence of the duality of veterans' activism: they are both moral guardians warning against overreach and institutional actors legitimizing limited intervention which points to a challenge of symbolic authority and institutional ambivalence. The Iran conflict also reveals how veterans' activism is politicized in electoral campaigns and grassroots movements. Candidates like Democrat Dan Helmer, a former Iraq and Afghanistan veteran, criticized the war as "a war of choice without strategic insight," invoking parallels with Iraq. Conversely, Republican Michael Bouchard, a Bronze Star recipient, defended the conflict as necessary, framing it as "peace through strength." These divergent perspectives illustrate how veterans' personal experiences shape starkly opposed political narratives. Meanwhile, grassroots organizations such as About Face: Veterans Against the War have staged protests, including occupying the Cannon House Office Building in April 2026 to demand an end to the war. Iraq veteran Aaron Hughes described despair at "another war of choice," but also hope in growing public opposition. This illustrates the contested legitimacy of veterans in shaping foreign policy.

Drawing from the above, from independence through the Revolutionary era, Civil War, World Wars, Vietnam, post-9/11 conflicts, and now the Iran war, U.S. veterans have consistently embodied a dual activism: autonomous grievance expression and partisan or institutional manipulation. Their legitimacy has been historically contingent, celebrated as founders, guardians, or bipartisan actors, yet eroded or contested depending on political context from Revolutionary neglect to Vietnam dissent to post-9/11 partisanship. Their influence persists through organizations like the American Legion, VFW, VVAW, IAVA, VoteVets,

and now About Face, as well as in congressional debates and electoral campaigns. Yet their impact is increasingly constrained by polarization, declining representation, and executive dominance in foreign policy. The Iran war underscores this continuity: veterans remain central but contested actors, shaping governance and public opinion while revealing the enduring duality of their activism.

Drawing Inference from the above, across Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States, veterans' activism emerges as a dual phenomenon: simultaneously autonomous grievance expression and partisan or state manipulation. In Zimbabwe, war veterans oscillated between independent demands for pensions and land, and being mobilized by ZANU-PF to consolidate power. Their legitimacy was historically contingent, rooted in liberation credentials but eroded as generational dynamics challenged their authority. In South Africa, MK veterans similarly positioned themselves as moral guardians of the ANC, invoking liberation ethos to critique corruption and inequality, yet their voices were often instrumentalized in factional battles or undermined by neglect and institutional failure. In the United States, veterans across epochs, from Revolutionary soldiers to Civil War GAR members, World War II beneficiaries of the GI Bill, Vietnam dissenters, post-9/11 advocates, and contemporary lawmakers, have consistently embodied this duality: celebrated as guardians of democracy yet contested as partisan actors or complicit in militarism.

A second issue lies in the historically contingent legitimacy of veterans. In Zimbabwe, legitimacy eroded as younger generations questioned liberation credentials. In South Africa, MK veterans' authority declined as corruption scandals and inequality undermined their symbolic capital. In the United States, legitimacy shifted across epochs: Revolutionary veterans were honoured but neglected materially; Civil War veterans were both reconciliatory and divisive; World War veterans were celebrated but racially excluded; Vietnam veterans were marginalized yet became moral critics; post-9/11 veterans were celebrated but politicized; and in the Iran war, veterans are simultaneously bipartisan guardians and partisan actors. In all three contexts, legitimacy is not fixed but contingent, shaped by political, generational, and institutional dynamics.

The third factor is the persistent yet constrained influence of veterans in governance. Zimbabwean veterans remained central in constitutional debates and internal fractures but were increasingly constrained by institutions and generational contestation. South African MK veterans persisted in debates on corruption, inequality, and land expropriation, but their influence was undermined by institutional failures and contested legitimacy. In the United States, veterans persist in shaping public opinion, congressional debates, and grassroots activism, but their influence is constrained by declining representation, polarization, and executive dominance in foreign policy. The Iran war underscores this continuity; veterans remain central in legislative pushback, electoral campaigns, and anti-war movements, yet their impact is limited by partisan divides and institutional inertia.

This study therefore interprets veterans' voices across Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States as central but contested, highlighting three interrelated insights. First, their activism has been consistently dual, as veterans act both as autonomous critics voicing grievances, whether over pensions, corruption, or foreign policy and as instruments of political manipulation within ruling parties or state structures. Second, their legitimacy has been historically contingent, rooted in liberation or military service but eroded or challenged over time by generational shifts, corruption scandals, inequality, or controversial wars such as Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Iran. Third, their influence has persisted across decades, remaining central in governance debates from land reform in Zimbabwe to ANC factional struggles in South Africa and congressional war powers in the United States, yet increasingly constrained by institutional decline, polarization, and contested authority. Taken together, these insights underscore veterans as enduring but ambivalent actors whose voices both shape and reflect the contradictions of governance across diverse political contexts. Comparatively, the literature highlights convergences, dual activism, contingent legitimacy, constrained influence while also revealing divergences. Zimbabwe and South Africa's debates are anchored in land and liberation politics, while the U.S. trajectory culminates in foreign policy and war powers, most recently in the Iran conflict.

Literature on the Platforms Veterans Use to Voice Their Concerns

Veterans' activism has emerged as a critical dimension of governance and political life across diverse

contexts, with platforms ranging from armed occupations, party-linked associations, NGOs, media campaigns, and lobbying. These mechanisms are not merely channels of voice but contested arenas where legitimacy, autonomy, and effectiveness are negotiated. The literature shows that while veterans often succeed in amplifying grievances and shaping policy debates, their activism is frequently constrained by institutional decline, patronage politics, or partisan manipulation. In developed countries, scholars highlight the professionalization of veterans' activism through NGOs and lobbying, yet caution against partisan capture. In Africa, literature emphasizes the enduring symbolic authority of liberation veterans, but also critiques their entanglement in party structures and factionalism. Across these contexts there is a recognition that veterans remain central actors in governance debates, while contradictions emerge in the autonomy of their activism and the responsiveness of states

In the United States, veterans' activism has increasingly taken the form of NGOs and lobbying organizations. VoteVets and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) are prime examples, using media campaigns and congressional lobbying to influence debates on healthcare, toxic exposure, and war powers. Parker (2021) argues that these organizations professionalize veterans' voices, amplifying grievances into policy debates. Yet Teigen (2018) cautions that their alignment with partisan agendas undermines autonomy, turning veterans into instruments of party politics rather than independent actors. This points to effective amplification but contested autonomy which illustrates the duality of veterans' activism in developed contexts. In the UK, the Royal British Legion has historically lobbied for pensions and welfare, but recent scholarship (Higate, 2022) highlights declining influence as public attention shifts away from veterans' issues. Media campaigns around Remembrance Day sustain symbolic authority, yet policy traction is limited. Canada presents a similar case: veterans' activism around PTSD and suicide prevention has gained visibility through media, but reforms remain slow. Cowen (2020) argue that veterans are celebrated symbolically but neglected materially, echoing patterns seen in earlier epochs. Germany diverges further, veterans' associations are weak compared to Anglo-American contexts, reflecting cultural ambivalence toward militarism.

These cases converge on the recognition that NGOs and lobbying are effective in amplifying veterans' voices, but they diverge on autonomy and legitimacy. U.S. organizations wield significant influence but risk partisan capture; UK and Canadian organizations struggle with declining relevance; German associations remain marginal. In This regard, effectiveness depends on institutional receptivity, where legislatures are open to lobbying, activism succeeds; where militarism is culturally contested, veterans' voices are muted. This therefore highlights the importance of institutional openness as a variable influencing activism outcomes.

Continuing, African veterans' activism often combines party-linked associations, armed occupations, and grassroots mobilization, reflecting liberation histories. In Namibia, the Namibia National Liberation Veterans Association has lobbied for pensions and land, but Melber (2020) notes contradictions between symbolic recognition and material neglect. Veterans are celebrated rhetorically but marginalized materially, echoing patterns seen in Zimbabwe. In Mozambique, FRELIMO veterans remain tied to ruling party structures, their activism constrained by patronage politics. Angola's veterans mobilize through associations demanding welfare, yet authoritarian governance suppresses dissent. These cases points to the recognition that veterans remain central to post-liberation politics, but diverge on autonomy: some act as independent critics, others as instruments of ruling parties. South Africa's MK veterans illustrate both effectiveness and contradiction. Scholars such as Simelane (2004) and Houston (2007) emphasize their role as moral guardians of the ANC, critiquing corruption and inequality. Yet Butler (2009) highlights their instrumentalisation in factional battles, undermining autonomy. Further studies (Mkhize, 2015; Tshabalala, 2018) show veterans critiquing corruption while also being implicated in patronage networks, blurring the line between guardianship and complicity.

Therefore, African cases converge on the recognition that veterans' activism is central to governance, but diverge on effectiveness. In Namibia and Angola, activism is constrained by authoritarianism; in Mozambique, by party patronage; in South Africa, by factionalism. My view is that African veterans' activism is effective in mobilization but limited in policy transformation, as party-linked structures constrain autonomy. This underscores the issue of patronage politics as a key factor influencing veterans' activism in

Africa. Activism across developed and African contexts literature cautions that partisan alignment undermines autonomy, turning veterans into instruments of party politics rather than independent actors.

African scholarship (Melber, 2020; Mkhize, 2015; Tshabalala, 2018) emphasizes the enduring symbolic authority of liberation veterans, but critiques their entanglement in patronage networks and factional struggles, particularly in Namibia, Angola, and South Africa. Across contexts, veterans remain central actors in governance debates, while the contradictions emerge in the autonomy of their activism, in developed contexts, activism is professionalized but risks partisan capture; in African contexts, activism is grassroots and symbolically powerful but constrained by party structures and authoritarian governance. These differences reflect institutional receptivity and political culture. That is contexts where institutions are open to lobbying and veterans, activism translates into policy or contexts where politics is dominated by patronage or authoritarianism and veterans voices are co-opted or suppressed.

Literature on the Outcomes of Veterans' Activism

Veterans' activism has produced diverse outcomes across global contexts, shaping governance, legitimacy, and policy in ways that can be stabilizing, destabilizing, or transformative. Literature demonstrates that veterans are consistently recognized as central actors in post-conflict and democratic politics, but the effects of their activism vary depending on regime type, institutional capacity, and responsiveness. Democracies often accommodate or institutionalize veterans' demands, producing stabilizing or transformative impacts, while others tend to repress activism, leading to destabilization.

In Colombia, veterans' activism through reintegration programs has had stabilizing effects, embedding ex-combatants into governance structures and reducing the risk of renewed conflict. García-Durán (2021) argues that institutionalization of veterans into welfare and employment programs strengthened state legitimacy by demonstrating responsiveness to grievances yet economic marginalization undermined trust, with many veterans perceiving reintegration as symbolic rather than substantive. The outcome was stabilizing in terms of peace consolidation, but destabilizing when unmet expectations fuelled grievances. Nicaragua's Sandinista veterans illustrate destabilizing impacts. Initially accommodated through pensions and symbolic recognition, they later mobilized against neglect, staging protests that challenged state legitimacy. Horton (2019) notes that repression of these protests eroded trust in government, destabilizing governance and undermining the revolutionary legacy. El Salvador presents a more transformative case, where veterans' activism pressured the state to expand welfare and recognition, reshaping post-war governance and embedding veterans into democratic institutions. Guatemala's veterans, however, faced repression, with activism destabilizing governance by exposing state neglect.

In the UK, veterans' lobbying through the Royal British Legion has had stabilizing impacts, reinforcing welfare systems and sustaining symbolic legitimacy. Higate (2022) explains that while material support has declined, symbolic recognition stabilizes governance by maintaining veterans' loyalty and embedding them into national rituals. France institutionalized veterans' activism through the Office National des Anciens Combattants, producing transformative impacts by embedding them into welfare governance. Regardless, scholars critique this as bureaucratic, limiting autonomy and reducing activism to administrative compliance. Russia presents a destabilizing case, where Chechen war veterans mobilized against corruption but faced repression, undermining legitimacy and fuelling distrust in government (Kramer, 2020). In the Balkans, veterans' activism has been both stabilizing and destabilizing. For example, in Croatia, veterans consolidated nationalist legitimacy by reinforcing state narratives, while in Bosnia, veterans' grievances destabilized fragile governance by exposing ethnic divisions. In this regard, veterans shape legitimacy, whether outcomes stabilize or destabilize governance depends on regime type and historical context.

Furthermore, China's veterans' protests have had destabilizing impacts, challenging state legitimacy by exposing neglect of pensions and welfare. Zhang (2021) notes that repression undermined trust, but partial accommodation stabilized governance temporarily. The outcome was hybrid; destabilizing in legitimacy, stabilizing in control. India's One Rank One Pension movement produced transformative impacts, forcing policy reforms and reshaping welfare governance. Singh (2022) argues that veterans' activism in India strengthened legitimacy by demonstrating democratic responsiveness, illustrating how veteran's activism

can transform governance positively. However, the Philippines presents a destabilizing case, where veterans of internal conflicts mobilized against neglect, undermining trust in government and exposing weak institutional capacity. Vietnam illustrates stabilizing impacts, with veterans integrated into party structures, reinforcing legitimacy and consolidating governance. Therefore, veterans shape policy.

Coming to Africa, Namibia institutionalized veterans through the Veterans Act of 2006, producing stabilizing impacts by embedding them into welfare systems and reinforcing legitimacy. Melber (2020) critiques the Act for selective inclusion, privileging ruling party loyalists while marginalizing others, illustrating how institutionalization can stabilize governance while undermining equity. Angola presents a destabilizing case, where repression of veterans' associations eroded trust and fuelled grievances, destabilizing governance and undermining legitimacy. Mozambique illustrates transformative impacts, with FRELIMO veterans accommodated through party structures, reshaping governance but limiting autonomy. Liberia's post-war veterans highlight destabilizing impacts, as neglect fuelled protests that challenged fragile governance and exposed weak state capacity.

Drawing from the above, across contexts veterans' activism has produced stabilizing, destabilizing, and transformative impacts. Veterans are central actors shaping governance, legitimacy, and policy yet outcomes depend on regime type, institutional capacity, and responsiveness. Literature demonstrates that outcomes are not uniform but deeply shaped by theories of legitimacy, state–society relations, and post-conflict governance. Veterans' activism can be stabilizing when it consolidates state authority, transformative when it forces policy reforms, or destabilizing when repression erodes trust. This aligns with Weberian notions of legitimacy, where authority is sustained not only through coercion but through responsiveness to social actors. Veterans, as carriers of symbolic capital derived from military or liberation service, embody a unique form of legitimacy that states must negotiate. When governments accommodate or institutionalize veterans, they reinforce legitimacy by demonstrating responsiveness; when they repress activism, they undermine legitimacy and destabilize governance.

From a state–society relations perspective, veterans' activism illustrates the dynamic interplay between social actors and state institutions. Migdal's (2001) "state in society" framework emphasizes how social groups shape state practices, and veterans exemplify this by forcing governments to expand welfare, reform policies, or confront corruption. The outcomes of veterans' activism also resonate with post-conflict governance theories, which emphasize the challenges of reintegration, legitimacy, and stability. Veterans are both beneficiaries and critics of post-conflict governance, their activism shaping trajectories of peace consolidation. Therefore transformative potential of veterans' activism lies in its ability to force governments to confront structural inequalities, as seen in El Salvador and India. This shows the contingent nature of veterans' legitimacy, it is rooted in service but shaped by political context. Democracies tend to accommodate or transform, authoritarian regimes repress and destabilize, while hybrid regimes oscillate between stabilization and destabilization.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Objective One: To analyse the platforms and mechanisms through which war veterans in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States articulate their voices

The findings presented here are drawn from fifteen key informant interviews (coded R1–R15), complemented by researcher observations.

Theme One: Armed Occupations and Direct Action

Respondents from Zimbabwe emphasized armed occupations as a powerful platform. One veteran expressed in Shona: "Takatora minda nemaoko edu nekuti hurumende yakanga isingateereri zvichemo zvedu" (We seized land with our own hands because the government was not listening to our grievances). Another respondent in Ndebele lamented: "Uhulumende wayengasiphathi kuhle, kwadingeka ukuthi sithathe umhlaba ngamandla" (The government was not treating us well, so we had to take land by force). Furthermore, another war veteran said this: "Land occupations were about reminding the state that our

sacrifices gave us the right to demand land and recognition". Several other respondents argued that armed occupations were both a tactic of desperation and a calculated political strategy. They explained that these actions echoed the liberation struggle, affirming veterans' legitimacy. This echoes Kriger (2003), who asserts that direct action forced radical policy shifts, and affirms Maringira's (2019) critique that such activism destabilized governance. The study therefore surmise that armed occupations illustrate the duality of veterans' activism: effective in forcing policy change, but destabilizing in eroding institutional legitimacy.

Theme Two: Party-Linked Associations

Respondents highlighted party-linked associations as another mechanism. One Zimbabwean veteran explained in Shona: "Sangano reveterans rakatipa izwi rimwe chete asi rakatisungirira kuZANU-PF" (The veterans' association gave us one voice but tied us to ZANU-PF). Similarly had this lamentation: We were mobilized during elections, not for our welfare but to secure votes for the ruling party. Another respondent in Ndebele argued this: "Ama structures eparty asipha izinsiza kodwa asithulisa uma sifuna ukukhuluma ngokuzimela" (The party structures gave us resources but silenced us when we wanted to speak independently). Adding on, other respondents argued that party-linked associations stabilized veterans' access to resources but constrained autonomy. They contended that these associations echoed patterns of patronage politics, aligning veterans with ruling party agendas. This affirm Melber's (2020) critique of African veterans' associations as instruments of patronage, and align with Butler's (2009) observation that South Africa's MK veterans were similarly instrumentalised in ANC factional battles. In this regard, party-linked associations are a key platform veterans use. They stabilize governance by embedding veterans into ruling structures, but they simultaneously constrain autonomy, producing contested legitimacy.

Theme Three: NGOs and Civil Society Platforms

Respondents pointed to NGOs as platforms for activism. One Zimbabwean veteran said this in Shona: "Masangano emaNGO akatipa nzvimbo yekutaura tiri toga, tisina kusungwa neparty (NGOs gave us space to speak independently, without being tied to the party). Similarly, another respondent had this to say: "Civil society platforms allowed us to frame our activism as democratic struggle, not just partisan politics. Another war veteran made this lamentation: "NGOs helped us articulate grievances, but the government often dismissed us as foreign-sponsored" In addition, other respondents argued that NGOs provided autonomy and legitimacy, but governments often delegitimized them as foreign-sponsored. They explained that NGOs echoed democratic ideals but were constrained by authoritarian narratives. This affirms observations by Higate's (2022) that NGOs amplify veterans' voices but risk delegitimation, and align with Parker's (2021) emphasis on NGOs' role in shaping congressional debates in the U.S. Therefore as one of the platforms war veterans use, NGOs provide autonomy and legitimacy in democratic contexts, but in authoritarian settings they are delegitimized, limiting effectiveness.

Theme Four: Media and Lobbying

Respondents emphasized the role of media and lobbying. One Zimbabwean veteran explained this in Shona: "Midhiya inotipa mukana wekukunzwikwa, pasina midhiya hapana angateerera (Media coverage gave us visibility; without it, no one would listen). Similarly, another said this: Lobbying parliamentarians was effective, but only when combined with public pressure through media. Furthermore, an astute veteran had this to bemoan: "The government controlled media narratives, portray us as violent when we voice our issues, which undermined our legitimacy". Several other respondents argued that media and lobbying were transformative platforms in democratic contexts but constrained in authoritarian settings. They explained that these mechanisms aligned with democratic responsiveness, echoing Singh's (2022) analysis of India's One Rank One Pension movement, and affirm Parker's (2021) emphasis on U.S. veterans' lobbying. In this regard, media and lobbying are key platforms veterans use across the world. However, they are transformative platforms in democracies, but constrained in settings where narratives are controlled.

The empirical findings above demonstrate that veterans employ diverse platforms to articulate their voices, but effectiveness varies. Armed occupations are effective but destabilizing, party-linked associations

stabilize governance but constrain autonomy, NGOs provide autonomy but risk delegitimization, and media/lobbying are transformative in democracies but constrained in other regimes. In complementing the interview data, documentary evidence provided a deeper understanding of the platforms and mechanisms through which veterans articulate their voices and influence government decisions. The Zimbabwe National War Veterans Association Report (2019) underscores the centrality of party-linked associations, noting that “war veterans were instrumental in shaping electoral campaigns, often serving as the grassroots mobilizers for ZANU-PF” (p. 14). This echoes the interview narratives where respondents lamented being mobilized for partisan purposes rather than welfare. It also affirms the argument by Melber (2020) that veterans’ associations in Africa often function as instruments of patronage, stabilizing governance but constraining autonomy.

Moving to the Zimbabwean, Ministry of Defence and War Veterans Affairs Strategic Plan (2021), the document emphasizes institutionalization, outlining the creation of formal structures such as the War Veterans League to embed veterans into governance. This aligns with respondents who argued that institutionalization stabilized their access to resources but limited independent activism. The plan explains why veterans’ activism in Zimbabwe often oscillates between empowerment and control, echoing Butler’s (2009) observation of MK veterans’ instrumentalisation in South Africa. The CARE International Project Report on Livelihoods for Ex-Combatants (2020) documents NGO interventions that provided veterans with small business grants and psychosocial support, framing activism within development discourse. This resonates with interview data where respondents noted NGOs gave them independent platforms, though governments often delegitimized them as foreign-sponsored. Similarly, the Practical Action Zimbabwe Report on Community Empowerment (2022) underscores veterans’ use of civil society platforms to articulate grievances, affirming their role in local governance. These NGO reports echo Higate’s (2022) observation that NGOs amplify veterans’ voices but risk delegitimization in authoritarian contexts.

In the context of the United States, the Congressional Research Service Report on Veterans’ Advocacy (2021) documented how organizations like VoteVets and IAVA professionalized veterans’ activism through lobbying and media campaigns. This complements interview findings from U.S. respondents who emphasized lobbying as transformative. The report affirms Parker’s (2021) argument that veterans’ NGOs in the U.S. have reshaped congressional debates, demonstrating the professionalization of activism in democratic contexts. In South Africa, the Department of Military Veterans Annual Report (2020) highlighted the accommodative responses through housing and education programs, institutionalizing veterans’ activism into welfare structures. This aligns with interview data where respondents emphasized accommodation but also exposed patronage. The report echoes Butler’s (2009) critique that MK veterans were instrumentalised in ANC politics, showing continuity between party-linked associations and state responses. In this regard, while Zimbabwean government related reports emphasize institutionalization and party mobilization, NGO reports highlight autonomy and welfare support, revealing tensions between state control and independent activism. South African documents affirm accommodation but expose patronage, while U.S. reports highlight professionalization and policy influence. Therefore the paper draws that veterans and the platforms they use make them simultaneously instruments of state control and vehicles of independent voice as they remain central to governance and legitimacy.

Objective Three: The outcomes of veterans’ interventions across Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States in shaping governance, legitimacy, and policy

Theme One: Stabilizing Impacts

Respondents emphasized that veterans’ activism sometimes stabilized governance by embedding them into welfare systems and reinforcing legitimacy. One Zimbabwean veteran explained in Shona: “Hurumende yakatipa minda nemapensheni, izvi zvakaita kuti tive nerunyararo pakati pedu nehurumende” (The government gave us land and pensions, and this created peace between us and the state). Another respondent had this to say: “Uhulumende wasinika amabhizimusi amancane, lokhu kwenza ukuthi singabi lezinkinga ezinkulu” (The government gave us small businesses, which reduced major problems). Adding on, a South African veteran respondent has this to say: “Izibonelelo zokuhlala kanye nezinhlelo zokufunda zenza ukuthi sizizwe siyingxenywe kahulumende (Housing benefits and education programs made us feel part of the

government). In addition, other respondents argued that accommodative responses stabilized governance by affirming veterans' legitimacy. They explained that welfare schemes and symbolic recognition aligned with veterans' sacrifices, echoing democratic responsiveness. This echoes Singh's (2022) analysis of India's accommodative pension reforms and align with Melber's (2020) critique that selective accommodation in Namibia reinforced patronage. In this regard, the paper argues that stabilizing impacts occur when governments accommodate veterans inclusively, embedding them into welfare systems and reinforcing legitimacy.

Theme Two: Destabilizing Impacts

Respondents highlighted destabilizing impacts. One Zimbabwean veteran lamented this: "Hurumende yakatishandisa mhirizhonga, izvi zvakaita kuti tisavimbe nayo" (The government used violence against us, and this made us lose trust in it). Another participant argued this: "Uhulumende wasibopha ngesikhathi sifuna amalungelo ethu, lokhu kwaphazamisa ubudlelwano" (The government arrested us when we demanded our rights, and this disrupted relations). Furthermore as earlier alluded, a South African veteran respondent who spoke in Sesotho had this to elaborate: "Mmuso o ile oa re thibela ha re ne re batla ho bua ka bokhopo ba ANC" ((The government blocked us when we wanted to speak about ANC corruption)). Several other respondents argued that repression destabilized governance by eroding trust and delegitimizing veterans' voices. They explained that governments framed veterans as threats, echoing authoritarian tendencies. This echoes Kramer's (2020) analysis of Russia's repression of Chechen veterans and Maringira's (2019) critique of Zimbabwe's suppression of dissenting veterans. In this regard, destabilizing impacts of veteran's interventions occur when governments repress activism, undermining legitimacy and fuelling grievances.

Theme Three: Transformative Impacts

Respondents emphasized transformative impacts, where activism reshaped governance and policy. One Zimbabwean veteran explained this: "Kutora minda kwakachinja hurongwa hwehurumende, zvichiita kuti nyika yose itarise nyaya yeveterans" (The land seizures changed government policy, making the whole nation focus on veterans' issues). In the same spirit, another respondent had this to say: "Uhulumende wasakha iWar Veterans League, lokhu kwashintsha indlela esibona ngayo uhulumende" (The government created the War Veterans League, and this changed how we viewed the state). Interviews revealed that veterans' activism has had significant influence on policy outcomes, particularly in Zimbabwe where war veterans transitioned into political leadership roles. Their presence in parliament and the ruling party structures has ensured that their demands are reflected in state policy.

Another respondent speaking on South Africa had this to say: "Ukulwa kwethu ngokumelene nokungabi nabulungisa kwashintsha izinhlelo zikahulumende" (Our struggle against injustice changed government programs). In South Africa, veterans' activism has been strongly tied to welfare outcomes, especially through civic organisations and the implementation of the Military Veterans Act. Interviews with MK veterans highlighted frustrations with delays in benefit distribution, but documentary evidence confirms measurable progress.

Interviewees from VoteVets and IAVA emphasized the importance of public support in legitimizing their activism. Another respondent speaking on U.S, had this to argue: "Lobbying Congress transformed how veterans' issues were prioritized in national policy". Adding to this, respondents also argued that activism transformed governance by forcing policy reforms and reshaping welfare systems. The respondents explained that activism echoed democratic ideals, aligning veterans with broader struggles for justice. This echoes Singh's (2022) analysis of India's transformative pension reforms and align with Parker's (2021) emphasis on U.S. veterans' lobbying. In this regard, one can argue that transformative impacts occur when activism forces governments to confront structural inequalities, reshaping governance and policy.

The findings therefore demonstrate that veterans' activism produces stabilizing, destabilizing, and transformative impacts. Stabilizing impacts occur when governments accommodate veterans inclusively, embedding them into welfare systems and reinforcing legitimacy. Destabilizing impacts occur when

governments repress activism, undermining legitimacy and fuelling grievances. Transformative impacts occur when activism forces governments to confront structural inequalities, reshaping governance and policy. According to Migdal (2001), social actors shape state practices, and veterans exemplify this by forcing governments to accommodate, repress, or transform governance. In this regard, veterans' activism can stabilize governance when accommodated, destabilize when repressed, or transform governance when institutionalized.

Coming to document analysis findings, the Zimbabwe National Land Reform Programme Evaluation Report (2020) highlights how veterans' land occupations transformed state policy, noting that "the radical redistribution of land was catalysed by war veterans' direct action, compelling government to adopt fast-track reforms" (p. 33). This echoes interview narratives where respondents emphasized occupations as transformative, but it also reveals contradictions: while policy was reshaped, governance legitimacy was destabilized by the erosion of rule of law. This therefore affirms Maringira's (2019) argument that veterans' activism in Zimbabwe simultaneously empowered and destabilized governance. Zimbabwean parliamentary record have noted this: "War veterans have held 23% of parliamentary seats in Zimbabwe since 2000, directly shaping land and agrarian policies" (Zimbabwe Parliamentary Hansard, 2021). This quantitative indicator complements the qualitative accounts of veterans' centrality in land reform and governance debates.

Moving to the South African context, the Department of Military Veterans Annual Report (2020) documents stabilizing impacts, particularly through housing and education programs that embedded veterans into welfare systems. The report notes that over 5,000 veterans benefited from housing schemes, reinforcing legitimacy by demonstrating state responsiveness. However, the South African Human Rights Commission Report (2019) critiques destabilizing impacts, highlighting instances where veterans' protests were suppressed, undermining trust in government. Whilst interviews highlighted frustrations with delays in benefit distribution, documentary evidence confirms measurable progress. The Department of Military Veterans reported that "over ZAR 1.2 billion in housing and healthcare benefits were disbursed to registered MK veterans by 2020" (South African Department of Military Veterans Annual Report, 2021). This figure substantiates the narratives of veterans' welfare struggles, showing how activism translated into tangible state commitments. These documents echo interview findings where respondents acknowledged welfare support but lamented selective inclusion and repression. This illustrates Butler's (2009) observation that MK veterans were instrumentalized in ANC politics, stabilizing governance through patronage but destabilizing legitimacy when dissent was curtailed.

In the context of the United States, the Congressional Research Service Report on Veterans' Advocacy (2021) documents transformative impacts, particularly through lobbying by organizations such as VoteVets and IAVA. The report highlights how veterans influenced congressional debates on healthcare and education, reshaping policy priorities. Veterans' activism was therefore observed to be more institutionalized, with lobbying groups and advocacy organisations shaping public discourse. Survey data reinforces this: "68% of Americans believe veterans' advocacy groups play a positive role in shaping foreign policy debates" (Pew Research Center, 2021). This quantitative evidence demonstrates how public perceptions bolster veterans' influence. This complements interview data where respondents emphasized lobbying as transformative, and it affirms Parker's (2021) argument that veterans' NGOs professionalized activism, embedding it into democratic institutions. Unlike Zimbabwe and South Africa, U.S. activism produced less destabilization and more transformation, reinforcing democratic consolidation. Therefore the analysed documents both echo and contradict interview data. Zimbabwean reports emphasize transformative impacts through land reform but expose destabilization of governance legitimacy. South African documents affirm stabilizing impacts through welfare programs but reveal contradictions in repressive practices. U.S. reports highlight transformative impacts through lobbying, echoing interview narratives of professionalized activism. In this light, veterans' activism can stabilize governance when accommodated, destabilize legitimacy when repressed, or transform policy when institutionalized.

The findings demonstrates that outcomes of veterans' activism are context-dependent. Across interviews and documents, the study reveals that veterans' activism is both a stabilizing and destabilizing force, depending on government responses and institutional openness. In Zimbabwe, activism destabilized governance

through armed occupations but transformed policy through land reform. In South Africa, activism stabilized governance through institutionalization but destabilized legitimacy when repressed. In the United States, activism transformed governance through lobbying and policy reforms, reinforcing democratic consolidation. Comparative survey data highlights the divergent public perceptions of veterans across contexts. Afrobarometer (2021) reported that “54% of Zimbabweans view war veterans as protectors of liberation values, while only 29% trust them in governance roles; in South Africa, 61% of respondents expressed confidence in MK veterans’ welfare advocacy.” These figures provide a quantitative anchor to the qualitative findings, showing how veterans’ legitimacy is simultaneously celebrated and contested depending on the national context.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A central finding is that Zimbabwean veterans relied heavily on armed occupations and party-linked associations to articulate their voices. This means activism was coercive and tied to ruling party structures. Interviews revealed veterans lamenting being mobilized for partisan purposes, while documents such as the Zimbabwe National War Veterans Association Report (2019) confirmed their electoral role. Kriger (2003) argued that direct action compelled state responsiveness, while Maringira (2019) critiqued such activism as destabilizing governance. Relating to Migdal’s (2001) “state in society” framework, veterans reshaped state practices through coercion. The implication is that policy must recognize veterans’ legitimacy while curbing coercive activism that undermines rule of law. In South Africa, veterans articulated their voices through ANC-linked structures, while in the U.S. they professionalized activism via NGOs and lobbying. This means activism was institutionalized in liberation contexts and professionalized in democracies. Butler (2009) observed MK veterans’ instrumentalization in ANC politics, while Parker (2021) highlighted U.S. veterans’ lobbying successes. Theoretically, this aligns with Weberian legitimacy, where responsiveness sustains authority. The implication is that policy must balance institutionalization with autonomy in South Africa, and strengthen lobbying mechanisms in the U.S. to ensure veterans’ voices shape governance inclusively.

Veterans’ activism produced stabilizing impacts when governments accommodated them inclusively. Interviews revealed veterans acknowledging welfare support, while documents such as the South African Department of Military Veterans Annual Report (2020) confirmed housing and education programs. Singh (2022) affirms that accommodative reforms strengthen legitimacy. Relating to post-conflict governance theories, stabilization occurs when veterans are embedded into welfare systems. The implication is that policy must prioritize inclusive welfare provision to consolidate peace and legitimacy. Findings also show that repression destabilized governance by undermining trust. Interviews revealed veterans lamenting arrests and suppression, while documents such as the South African Human Rights Commission Report (2019) confirmed repressive practices. Kramer (2020) observed similar repression in Russia, while Maringira (2019) critiques Zimbabwe’s suppression of dissent. Theoretically, repression destabilizes legitimacy by eroding trust. The implication is that policy must avoid repression and instead engage veterans inclusively to prevent destabilization. Furthermore findings show that veterans’ activism produced transformative impacts when it forced governments to confront structural inequalities. Interviews revealed Zimbabwe’s land reform as transformative but destabilizing, South Africa’s anti-corruption struggles as transformative, and U.S. lobbying as transformative and consolidating. Documents such as the Zimbabwe Land Reform Evaluation Report (2020) and the Congressional Research Service Report (2021) affirmed these impacts. Singh (2022) highlights transformative pension reforms in India, while Parker (2021) emphasizes U.S. lobbying successes. Relating to Weberian legitimacy and post-conflict governance theories, transformation occurs when activism reshapes policy. The implication is that policy must engage veterans as legitimate actors in reform processes, ensuring activism strengthens governance rather than destabilizing it.

The findings affirm Weberian theories of legitimacy, which emphasize responsiveness as central to authority, and align with post-conflict governance frameworks that highlight reintegration and recognition as critical to stability. Yet their significance lies not only in confirming existing theory but also in extending it through comparative relevance. By juxtaposing African liberation contexts with a developed democracy, the study tested the applicability of Weberian legitimacy and Migdal’s state in society framework across diverse settings. In Zimbabwe, the marginalization of veterans in the 1980s sowed grievances that later radicalized

into coercive activism, compelling radical policy shifts but destabilizing governance. In South Africa, veterans' contested legitimacy reflects generational tensions within a democratic framework, where institutional accommodation reinforced welfare but constrained autonomy. In the United States, activism was shaped by constitutional freedoms and institutional safeguards, transforming veterans' voices into professionalized lobbying and stabilizing democratic consolidation.

Thus, veterans' activism emerges as a comparative lens through which legitimacy and governance can be theorized, it can consolidate democracy when accommodated, destabilize governance when repressed, or transform policy when institutionalized. The contextual differences underscore that historical trajectories matter, grievance-driven radicalization in Zimbabwe, generational contestation in South Africa, and institutionalized freedoms in the United States each illustrate how activism interacts with state responses to produce divergent outcomes. This comparative relevance strengthens theory-building by demonstrating that veterans are not passive welfare recipients but decisive agents whose activism compels governments to respond, reshapes legitimacy, and redefines the trajectory of democratic consolidation across varied political landscapes

CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

War veterans are decisive and central actors in shaping governance, legitimacy, and policy, not peripheral beneficiaries of welfare systems. Evidence from Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States shows that war veterans articulate their voices through diverse platforms, ranging from; coercive occupations, party-linked associations, NGOs, media, and lobbying, whose form and impact are shaped by regime type and institutional openness. In Zimbabwe, coercive activism such as land occupations compelled radical policy shifts but destabilized governance; in South Africa, institutionalized associations embedded veterans into party structures yet constrained autonomy; in the United States, lobbying and media professionalized veterans' voices, embedding them into democratic institutions. Veterans' activism in these settings produced stabilizing impacts when governments accommodated them inclusively, destabilizing impacts when governments repressed them, and transformative impacts when activism forced states to confront structural inequalities, reshaping governance and policy. These dynamics affirm theoretical insights from Kriger, Higate, Migdal, Weber, Singh, and Parker, underscoring that veterans' activism oscillates between autonomy and capture, stabilizes or destabilizes legitimacy, and transforms policy depending on state responses. The duality of veterans' activism illustrates that it can consolidate democracy when accommodated, destabilize governance when repressed, or transform policy when institutionalized, reflecting broader theories of legitimacy and post-conflict governance.

Therefore, veterans' activism is both a challenge and an opportunity; it challenges regimes by exposing inequalities and demanding recognition, but it also offers opportunities to strengthen legitimacy and consolidate democracy when governments engage veterans inclusively. Context matters, authoritarian regimes experience coercive and destabilizing activism, liberation contexts institutionalize but constrain activism, and democracies professionalize and transform activism, yet across all cases veterans emerge as active agents of change whose activism compels governments to respond, reshapes welfare and policy frameworks, and redefines legitimacy. The overarching implication is that; the stability and consolidation of democracy rests on how states engage veterans. When governments repress or instrumentalize veterans, legitimacy is eroded; when they are recognized as legitimate partners, activism strengthens governance, consolidates democracy, and transforms policy. Veterans' activism is therefore an unavoidable force in state, society relations, and inclusive engagement with veterans is essential for stable, legitimate, and democratic governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the findings and literature, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen governance, legitimacy, and policy outcomes in relation to veterans' activism:

1. Governments should design welfare schemes that are comprehensive, transparent, and inclusive, ensuring that all veterans benefit equitably rather than selectively. This reduces patronage and strengthens legitimacy.
2. While institutionalizing veterans into formal structures stabilizes governance, policies must safeguard autonomy by allowing veterans independent platforms to articulate grievances without political capture.
3. Governments should engage veterans as legitimate partners in policymaking, incorporating their voices into national development strategies rather than treating them as instruments of patronage or repression.
4. Repressive responses erode trust and destabilize governance, therefore states must prioritize dialogue and negotiation over coercion to maintain legitimacy and democratic consolidation.
5. NGOs and civil society organizations should be recognized as critical partners in amplifying veterans' voices, providing welfare support, and fostering reintegration, especially in fragile democracies.
6. Veterans should be supported to professionalize activism through lobbying, media engagement, and policy advocacy, as seen in the U.S., to ensure their concerns shape governance constructively.
7. Governments must adopt responsive policies that address veterans' socio-economic needs while reinforcing democratic values, thereby transforming activism into a stabilizing and transformative force.
8. States should learn from comparative experiences adapting lessons to strengthen governance in their own contexts.

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