

**FROM ELECTIONS TO ENGAGEMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF IMPROVISED
CONSTITUENCY OFFICES AS PLATFORMS FOR CITIZEN
PARTICIPATION IN MALAWI**

MASTER OF ARTS (POLITICAL SCIENCE) THESIS

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UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my own work. Where the work of other people has been used, acknowledgments have been duly made. I also declare that it has not been submitted for any degree in any other university. All errors herein are my own.

STEVEN CHINGAIBE

Full Legal Name

Signature

Date

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

We certify that this thesis is the students' own work and acknowledgments have been made where the work of other people has been used. We further certify that it has not been submitted to any other university for any degree and it is therefore submitted with our approval.

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DEDICATION

My dear late parents Mr. and Mrs. Chingaipe. They once told me, “We will go happiest parents if only we live to witness the first university graduation in our family from our last of ten children”. My girls, this is the standard.

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Over and above everything, I am grateful to the Absolute Being and Ultimate Transcendental Reality for granting me the grace to live, pursue and accomplish my aspirations. I have worked as if everything depends on me, prayed and believed as if everything depends on Him. Thank you for taking care of the breadth and depth of my success.

ABSTRACT

Following the re-introduction of multiparty democracy in Malawi in 1994, numerous legal and policy instruments as well as democratic political institutions both formal and informal have been established. These frameworks aim to foster proactive citizen participation in democratic governance beyond elections. Among these institutions are Improvised Constituency Offices operated by MPs in various constituencies across the country. This paper examines the significant of these offices as platforms for constituents' proactive participation in the democratic governance process in Malawi, particularly beyond election periods. The study utilized exploratory research questions in order to collect empirical data which was supplemented by relevant secondary sources. The study's population include the Office of the Clerk of Parliament, academia, MPs, political party representatives, Civil Society Organization officials and several other categories of individuals. Data was analyzed using interpretation and content analysis approaches. The study found that a significant number of constituents are aware of the existence and functions of the Improvised Constituency Offices as platforms for political mobilization, legislative input, registration of community development needs and obtaining both personal and collective support especially during emergencies. Constituents engage their MPs through various mechanisms such as visits to constituency offices, phone calls, political and social structures, letters, home visits and media platforms. However, the operations of these offices are not inclusive, responsive, accessible, accountable and do not accommodate diverse opinions. The absence of a legal framework, standard operating procedures and resources impedes opportunities for candid and objective participation. This study is important because it will supplement scholarship on the dynamics of power relations and political influence between constituents and their MPs at the platform of the Improvised constituency offices. It is therefore recommended that legal frameworks, standard operating procedures and resources be formally provided to establish and operationalize these offices, thus fostering constituents' participation and consolidating democracy.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACDEG	African Charter for Democracy, Elections and Governance
ADC	Area Development Committee
AU	African Union
CO	Constituency Office
CHRR	Center for Human Rights and Rehabilitation
CPA	Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
ICO	Improvised Constituency Office
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
IRI	International Republican Institute
FSG	Focus Study Group
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
MCP	Malawi Congress Party
MP	Members of Parliament
NICE	National Initiative for Civic Education
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NPC	National Planning Commission
NSO	National Statistical Office
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PCIC	Parliamentary Communication and Information Centre
PCO	Parliamentary Constituency Office
PSIP	Public Sector Investment Program
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SONA	State of the Nation Address
T/A	Traditional Authority
UDF	United Democratic Front
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction and Background of the Study

The primacy of this study is to examine the relevance of Improvised Constituency Offices (ICOs) as a platform for constituents' proactive participation in the democratic governance process in Malawi. ICOs in this context refer to office platforms which individual MPs have been informally creating since the adoption of multiparty democracy in attempt to create an engagement platform with their constituents. Public participation is one of the common ideal relevant to the contemporary democratic system of governance. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 16 rallies countries to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels with specific targets to; (a) develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels (target 16.6), (b) ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (Rodriguez, 2016, p2). More also, the constitutive act of the African Union (2002), article 1(g) promote the democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance. Almost all the above explicated principles and values are the very core of representative democratic governance framework. They denote the primacy of public participation in democratic governance.

However, according to Kayuni and Jamali (2023), much as democracy may outwardly appear as a very successful system of governance because it caters to citizens interests, it is currently facing numerous challenges due to inherent inefficiencies. Prime among these inefficiencies according to Sharma and Menocal (2008), is the vertical primary relationship between the citizen and the state.

Cornwall and Gaventa (2001), posit that around the world, there is a growing crisis of legitimacy characterizing the relationship between citizens and institutions that affect their lives. That is, traditional forms of political representation are being re-examined, direct democratic mechanisms are increasingly being drawn upon to enable citizens to play a more active part in decisions which affect their lives.

In the Malawian context, following the June 1993 referendum, Malawians voted for the re-introduction of a multiparty democracy system of governance (Magolowondo:2009). This marked the beginning of the contemporary representative democratic political dispensation where Members of Parliament (MPs) among other political leaders, are directly elected by the constituents to represent their interests at the National Assembly. Successive political governments have promulgated both legislative and institutional frameworks aimed at bringing government tentacles closer to the people and creating an effective feedback loop from the citizenry. Among other efforts, in 1998 government adopted the decentralization policy which was implemented beginning the year 2005. According to Chiweza (2022), among the rationales for decentralization was promotion of public participation and democratization in political and development governance. However, despite the critical roles MPs play in democratic governance in Malawi, they do not have a formal platform in terms of an office within the government structure where they can engage with their constituents or vice versa on matters of both constituency and national policy concern.

In his maiden State of the Nation Address (SONA) as reported by Nhlane.S (2020), by Nyasa times of 12th September, 2020, president Chakwera highlighted government plans to construct MPs houses and constituency offices. This was among others based on the premise that it would reduce the democratic representation gap between MPs and their constituents by providing an effective permanent platform for engagement on both constituency and national interests hence consolidating democracy. According to The Nation News of 3/7/2022 editorial caption, despite widespread public disaffection over the constituency offices project on the grounds of sustainability due to economic reasons the budget for the same was outlined in the 2022 Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) budget document.

Furthermore, the Common Wealth Parliamentary Association (CWPA) report on Self-Assessment of the National Assembly of Malawi (2023), indicate that there are plans to trial parliament-owned and run Constituency Resource Centers in some constituencies as part of the strategic plan to give the legislature a presence in the constituency and allow members a space to meet constituents and deal with casework. The Tonse Alliance led administration intentions to build constituency offices imply an acknowledgement of the existence of the representation gap between MPs and their constituents.

However, despite the absence of a legal framework on the institution and operationalization of the Constituency Offices (COs), some MPs through personal initiatives continue to improvise constituency offices in attempt to foster effective constituents participation in democratic governance by among others bringing political representation closer to the electorate. This probably responds to study findings by the National Democratic Institute Malawi (NDI:1996), which indicated that there is a very strong desire by the constituents to play an active role in the social, political and economic development of their country and to have a close engagement with their political representatives. These offices are usually designated in rented apartments, political party structures or within the MPs constituency residence premises.

Paradoxically, notwithstanding the institution of the Improvised Constituency Offices (ICOs) in some political constituencies across the country, statistical evidence from Afro-barometer Malawi surveys for three successive rounds 7, 8 and 9 conducted in the years 2017, 2020 and 2022, among others indicate a wide democratic gap between the parliamentarians and their constituents. Empirical evidence indicate that majority of the constituents do not communicate or engage with their MPs on any constituency related issue or problem even though it is their greatest desire that their MPs be able to listen to them and act on their demands and interests. The findings largely reveal high levels of constituents disconnection and therefore disaffection with their MPs especially with regards to delivery of constituency related services. They further portray widespread limitations to the possibility of individual constituents to reach out and personally engage their MPs on constituency related matters. For example;

Table 1: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views; A Member of Parliament

	2017 percentage (%)	2020 Percentage (%)	2022 Percentage (%)
Never	90.0	85.2	84.9
Only once	3.0	4.7	5.8
Few times		5.6	6.5
Often	0.5	4.3	2.2
Don't know		0.2	0.1

Source: Afro-barometer briefing papers Nos. 7, 8 and 9 for 2017, 2020 and 2022

Table 2: Our elected officials should listen to the constituents' views and do what they demand

	2020	2022
Agree very strongly	64.5	74.2
Agree	10.9	5.6
Refused	0.1	0.2
Don't know	0.2	0.3

Source: Afro-barometer briefing papers Nos. 8 and 9 for 2020 and 2022

In summation, the statistics indicate that between 84.9% and 90% of the respondents have had no any form of engagement or interaction what so ever with their MP on any pertinent problems or view to do with the constituency. To the contrary, the statistics indicate that between 64.5% and 74.2 % of the constituents are of the view that their MP should listen to them and do as they demand.

This manifests a very wide democratic gap between the MPs and their constituents and raises intriguing questions especially with respect to constituents capacity to participate in the democratic governance process particularly beyond elections. It therefore brings to question the relevance of the ICOs as a platform for constituents participation in the democratic governance process particularly beyond elections. This is in consideration of the fact that constituency offices are well known to be platforms

that foster non-electoral democratic virtues such as participation and accountability between MPs and their constituents, (Okereke et al., 2018).

According to Heywood (2004, p. 233), “Political representation, acknowledges a link between two otherwise separate entities which are government and the governed which implies that through this link the people’s views are articulated and their interests secured”. Furthermore, Royidah et al. (2021), espouse that political representation by MPs only occurs if there is evidence of consultation as well as engagement in the decision making and promotion of local policy formulation. This entails that in a democratic political set up representation implies democratic tenets such civic or public participation in the governance process among other fundamental principles of good governance. In the light of this premise, it is therefore imperative that the elected duty bearers, MPs in this regard and rights holders who are constituents sustain effective engagement platforms like constituency offices among others.

Yinka et al. (2019), explicate that while democracy has been defined in different ways depending on the influence of many factors including culture, tradition, ideology and politics what is much less crucial is that citizens would like to have at least some meaningful say in how they are represented by their governments. This connotes that representative democracy by design thrives on effective participation in the governance process either through electoral or non-electoral mechanisms. It is against this understanding therefore that the institution of the Constituency Office becomes one of the fundamental frameworks that can make pro-active political participation especially among constituents much more feasible.

Smith (2003), advances that the notion constituency office in a legislative sense is an organized office space or an outlet often located at the electoral constituency of the legislator where a member of a local, regional, or national legislative house is able to engage and meet their constituents. Articulating further, Okereke et al. (2018), underscore constituency office as a concept and practice that creates the avenues for the elected representatives to maintain close and interactive relationship that will help to deepen democratic governance. They further advance that constituency offices are important avenues for legislators to communicate to their constituents government policy responsiveness, rendering of constituency related services and for constituents

to advocate for resource allocation and articulate their interests. This entails that the institution of the constituency office might be very critical for effective democratic representation by among others providing a conducive platform for fostering constituents active participation in representative democracy.

In a synopsis, this study is inspired by the quest to examine the relevance of the Improvised Constituency Offices as a platform for constituents participation in the democratic process especially beyond elections. The study does not necessarily intend to analyze the acts or forms of public political participation but rather seeks to examine the conduciveness of the participation atmosphere within the Improvised Constituency Offices. This is mainly with respect to inclusivity, responsiveness, accessibility, respect for human rights particularly freedom of opinion and expression among others. The study focused on bottom-up approach to political participation and that is; examining the capacity of the constituents to initiate political participation mechanisms with the intention to influence either public policy or delivery of constituency related services at the platform of the ICO.

1.2 Problem Statement

A number of studies have interrogated the concept of political participation in democratic Malawi and the dynamics of the relationship between incumbent MPs and their constituents particularly beyond elections (NDI,1996; Chirwa et al., 2000; Hussein, 2004; Patel &Svasand, 2007; Afro-barometer Malawi rounds 7,8 and 9 of 2017, 2020 & 2022 respectively). However, these studies have not examined the relevance of ICOs as a platform for constituents proactive political participation within the democratic framework particularly beyond elections. Three successive studies by Afro-barometer Malawi (Afro-barometer Round 7;2017; 8, 2020 & 9;2022), have demonstrated that overwhelming majority of the electorate who are constituents have huge disaffection over the scope of MP-constituents relationship. The studies revealed that largely majority of the constituents feel that they are neither effectively represented nor granted an opportunity to have a say on how they are represented. This is particularly with regards to among others the potential of individual or collective constituents to secure personal interface opportunities with the MP in order to articulate their interests and expectations. To a greater extent there is a wide participation gap between the constituents and their MPs.

Related studies by Chirwa et al. (2000), Hussein (2004), and Patel and Tostensen (2007), delved on MP- constituents relationship by identifying and analyzing top-down structures for engagement between MPs and various stakeholders which include constituents and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The studies provide an overview of existing structures and channels for dissemination of information about parliamentarian's activities to the constituents. These engagement avenues include political party structures, local government structures, the media, traditional leaders, letters, personal visits to MPs homes and public rallies. It was largely established that effective engagement and therefore pro-active democratic participation avenues in the governance framework between MPs and their constituents are greatly constrained by their design and operations. The studies generally agreed to the assertion that the prevailing engagement and participatory platforms between MPs and their constituents are not as much inclusive and responsive to constituents interests and expectations.

Chiweza (2007, p. 142), further stipulates that democratization is synonymous to public participation such that,... "governance is democratic at local level to the extent that people are able to influence the decisions that most likely affect them". In reference to this position Touchton et al. (2017), argues that democratic institutions should create opportunities for citizens to gather information, organize and advocate for their interests. The prevailing empirical evidence captured above therefore raises captivating questions on the relevance of the ICOs as a platform for constituents political participation. The study is therefore filling in an important knowledge gap in the debate pertaining to democratic political representation particularly constituents capacity to politically participate and influence the democratic governance process at the platform of the Improved Constituency Offices in Malawi.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This section discusses the study's main and specific objectives as indicated below.

1.3.1 General Objective

The main objective of this study is: To analyse the relevance of the Improvised Constituency Offices as platforms for constituents participation in the democratic governance process in Malawi.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

The study's specific objectives are:

- i. To analyze different mechanisms constituents use in their quest to engage their MPs.
- ii. To assess constituents knowledge levels on the existence and functions of the MP and ICOs as participation platforms.
- iii. Examine the operations of the ICOs with respect to fostering constituents participation in the democratic governance process beyond elections.

1.4 Main Research Question

How relevant are the Improvised Constituency Offices as platforms for constituents participation in the democratic governance process?

1.4.1 Sub Questions

- i. What mechanisms do constituents use in their attempt to engage with their MPs?
- ii. What are constituents awareness levels on the existence and functions of the MPs and the Improvised Constituency Offices as a participation platform?
- iii. How effective are the operations of the Improvised Constituency Offices with regards to fostering constituents participation in the democratic process?

1.5 Study Justification

Although there has been numerous studies on political participation in Malawi, it is exigent to understand the relevance of Improvised Constituency Offices as platforms for political participation. This study is important because it will supplement knowledge on the dynamics of democratic representation and democracy consolidation as a whole. The ultimate assumption is that in a consolidating democracy, free engagement platforms such as ICOs ought to provide effective forums for political participation. The rationale of this study is therefore to help to understand constituents perceptions on the effectiveness of the operations of the Improvised Constituency Offices in facilitating overall proactive constituents political participation especially beyond elections. The study will provide further insights into operational successes and obstacles of the ICOs thereby helping to encourage and improve in order to effectively respond to constituents interests. Furthermore, the study will also supplement scholarship of politics of public participation especially capacity of constituents to influence their interests beyond elections.

1.6 Conclusion

The chapter has made known the topic of the research in brevity by explaining the context for conducting the study. Through the problem statement, the chapter has shown the gap which the study aimed to fill which is to unearth the relevance of the Improvised Constituency Offices as a platform for constituents political participation in the democratic governance process. The chapter has further outlined the main objective of the study, the research question and justification for conducting the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews a dearth of literature on what others have authored in relation to the study. The literature has been drawn from a wide-pool of authors both local and international. It presents conceptual map which gives understanding of the notions public political participation and constituency offices. It explicates on democratic context of political participation, contemporary trends in democratic political participation, mechanisms for political participation, importance of public political participation, constituency offices and public political participation, constituent's participation in Zimbabwe and Zambia, constituents participation in Malawi from colonial era to contemporary democratic dispensation and finally the theoretical underpinning; the new institutionalism.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

2.2.1 Public Political Participation

Public participation is considered one of the fundamental concept in this study. Public participation with regards to political, administrative or development has become one of the globally cross cutting concept in the contemporary democratic dispensation and it generally symbolizes a tenet of good governance. According to Mostert (2005), there is no consensus about the meaning of participation and its purposes such that the understanding, practice and application of the concept depends on ideological views of the roles of governments, citizens and organized interests.

In literature, a distinction is made between developmental and political participation (Cohen & Upholff, 1980), and between direct and indirect participation Crook and Sverisson, (2001 as in Chiweza 2021, p. 30). Specifically, this study is interested in constituents non-electoral political participation in attempt to foster constituency interests and where possible influence public policy.

According to Chiweza (2021), specifically, the adoption of democratic decentralization and inclusionary politics participation has come to signify a new emphasis that embodies possibilities of the marginalized engaging with state decision making process. Gulubovic (2010), argues that participation in representative democracy is regarded as a critical ingredient whose underlying role is not to replace representative democracy which is founded on competitive elections and separation of powers but rather to complement it. Generally, there are two major conceptions of political participation which have led to the conceptual separation between conventional and unconventional types of participation (Peterson, 1990). The conventional category includes the electoral participation and actions associated with it: voting and electoral campaign activities and unconventional participation refers to the rest of the activities connecting to contacting officials protesting and political violence; (Gherghina 2013, p. 5).

Verba, et al. (1978:1), Brady (1998), Fox (2013), and Van Deth (2021), among others define political participation as, "...those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/ or the actions that they take". The emphasis is on constituents capacity to influence public policy through the mechanism of elections and legal acts by private citizens. However there other civil actions or mechanisms that are not necessarily legitimate but very effective in influencing and fostering civic interests like civil disobedience. Verba and Nie (1972, p.2), considers political participation as a categorical term for "peoples or citizens power". Arnstern (1969, p. 216), as "...all the activities aiming to influence existing power structures".

This study adopts a definition as explicated by Ekman and Amna (2012, p. 286), who define political participation as , " Actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or support government and politics or as all voluntary activities by

individual citizens intend to influence either directly or indirectly political choices at various levels of the political system”. The definition is broad and covers all the three dimensions which are; a manifest and observable actions or activities that people voluntarily take part in, people means ordinary citizens not political elites or civil servants and lastly, it refers to the deliberate attempts to influence the people in power to make a difference. The definition clearly spells out the source, the motive or objective and the expected outcomes. Lastly, constituents participation as referred to in this study specifically implies to the ability of the constituents to personally reach out and engage or express their views to their MP on any pertinent interests requiring his or her attention through the platform of the constituency office. This is generally with the hope to potentially influence government policies or processes in their favor.

With respect to this study, provision of a participatory framework like a Constituency Office implies creating a conducive platform for inculcating elements of political participation among constituents in democratic governance. These may include models such as consultation, dialogue, information sharing among others. According to Golubovic (2010), the underlying role of proactive citizen participation in democracy is not to replace representative democracy but rather to supplement it and make it better functioning.

2.2.2 Constituency Office

Another concept at the center of this academic work is constituency office as a political institution. In the first place, (North, 1990; Jepperson, 1991; Scott, 2001), explicate institutions as humanly devised rules, social structures made up of symbolic elements and activities that shape human interaction and give pattern to human behavior by enabling and constraining their activities. Zengeni and Yusuf (2018), posit that a constituency is a community or an area represented by an office holder or a community whose electorates send a representative to national assembly. With reference to a community or area it implies that this is a population within a definite geographical demarcation. This study adopts the understanding of constituency office as promulgated by Yusufu and Abraham (2018), who define it as a fundamental framework established within electoral constituencies that serve as a mechanism or a platform through which legislators are elected representatives, interact with their

constituents on regular basis for accountability and input purposes. According to Okereke (2018), constituency office is a concept and practice that creates the avenues for the elected representatives to maintain close and interactive relationships that will help to deepen democratic governance.

2.3 Democratic Context of Political Participation

According to Dahl (1989, p. 98, as in Somerville, 2011), democracy is often understood as an ideal or principle of popular equality. According to this principle all members of a collectivity or association have an equal effective right to participate in authoritative binding decision making. This assumes that first there must exist a body (demos) with membership criteria fully recognized by the members themselves, secondly, the members of this body must have an equal power in the body's decision making processes and thirdly they must recognize the decisions made as requiring their compliance. Grigsby (2012), further holds that the concept democratic government implies a government in which people and the government are connected in terms of both the input and the output dimensions of government. That is, the people have the freedom to put ideas into government and to shape government through elections, contacting officials, lobbying and so on. From the output perspective, laws and policies of government indicate that the government is in the hands of a self-governing people.

In the light of (Dahl, 1998; Young, 2000), democratic theory conceives democracy as any set of arrangement that instantiates the principle that all affected by collective decisions should have an opportunity to influence the outcome. He further explicates that individuals are morally and legally equal; they are equally capable of autonomy with respect to citizenship that is conscious self-determination all factors being equal. As a result, it follows that collective decisions affecting self-determination should influence those affected. In this context, constituents as right holders to effective political representation must be able to access and engage both their representatives and their constituency related services. There ought to be an effective platform for participation in the governance process so that the constituents do not completely lose their political resources upon voting.

According to Urbinati and Warren (2008), the standard account of representation in a liberal representative democracy has four main features. In the first place, representation is understood as a principal-agent relationship in which the principals-constituencies formed on territorial basis-elect agents to stand for and act on their interests and opinion that's separating the source of legitimate power from those who exercise that power. Secondly, electoral representation identifies a space within which the sovereignty of the people is identified with state power. Thirdly electoral mechanisms ensure some measure of responsiveness to the people by representative and political parties who speak and act in their name and finally the universal franchise endows electoral representation with an important element of political equality. This is because in essence democratic representation is characterized by a number of values among others participation of the public, responsiveness and inclusiveness in the governance processes.

Democratic representation is therefore congruent to public engagement in the governance processes through mechanisms such as participation. If democratic representation must reflect and serve the core interests of the represented beyond elections and if the represented are not to absolutely lose their political resources, there must be a fully functional political and administrative framework such as constituency offices which should act as platform for effective engagement in all spheres including constituency related services. To this regard Yaqub (2004), posits democracy as a system anchored on the informed and active participation of the people in the governance process beyond elections.

Table 3: Integrated Framework for Public Participation

Type of Participation	Labeling Participation and non-participation	Substantive Description of Participation
Citizen-power	Partnership	Agreed sharing of decision making between duty bearers and rights holders
	Delegated power	Citizens make final decisions in some important areas
	Citizen Control	Citizens make final decisions over most important areas.
Tokenism	Informing	Citizens are told about the decisions taken with no ability to influence the decisions
	Consultations	Citizens are asked their opinions on solutions proposed by others
	Placation	Citizens are given some role in decision making but constrained in their ability to contribute
Non-participation	Manipulation	Citizens are influenced to change their views on decisions
	Therapy	Under a masquerade of involving citizens, the experts subject citizens to clinical group therapy.

Source: Arnstein.S :1969,. *(With modifications by author)*

Much as the above framework represent the general overview of participation, it is very relevant with regards to the dynamics of political relationship between constituents and their political representatives especially Members of Parliament. The constituents would like to participate in the democratic governance process by at least having a say in the way they are being represented beyond elections. According to IPU &UNDP (2016), citizen participation is intrinsic in democracy and essential to

political trust therefore effective relationship between constituents and their MPs is very crucial for proper representation. The above elements of participation mechanisms are therefore crucial for a healthy democracy and creating a conducive platform for candid engagement becomes one of the critical steps towards facilitating constituents pro-active participation.

2.4 Contemporary Trends in Democratic Political Participation

According to Zittel and Fuchs (2007), there is growing empirical evidence across the globe suggesting downward trend in electoral participation, political organization membership, trust in political institutions and public political engagement and all-encompassing assumption is that it signals that citizens are turning their backs on democracy. Norayan et al. (2000:), posit that there is a growing crisis of legitimacy between citizens and the institutions that affect their lives. They further explicate that citizens speak of mounting disillusionment with government based on concerns about corruption, lack of responsiveness to the needs of the poor and the absence of the sense of connection with elected representatives.

For example, according to Swedish Ministry of Justice (2000), as in Fung (2015), In Sweden, a commission on democracy deliberated between 1998 and 2000 on institutional reforms to increase political participation with emphasis on strengthening local basis of democracy as a result of observing elements of democratic deficits. In a similar scenario, Canadian government in 2004 tabled reform initiative in the house of commons that outlined the parliamentary reform measures to remedy the democratic deficit, (Seidle, 2004). According to many indications, the bond between citizens and political institutions has weakened in the United States and other industrialized democracies, (Fung, 2015). Bemoaning the declining of political participation among US citizens and its implications on democracy, Macedo et al. (2005, p. 1), posits,

America democracy is at risk. The risk comes not from some external threat but from disturbing internal trends; an erosion of the activities and capacities of citizenship. Americans have turned away from politics and the public sphere in large numbers, leaving our civic life impoverished. Citizens participate in public affairs less

frequently, with less knowledge and enthusiasm, in fewer venues, and less equally than healthy for a vibrant democratic polity.

All these scenarios demonstrate that there is waning public trust in representative democratic structures. According to Fung (2015), the decline may stem from the perceptions that politicians and parties have lost touch and that these actors are unresponsive to many and corrupt or simply ineffective.

However, besides evidence suggesting waning of public trust in representation institutions there are growing social and political efforts orchestrated by both state and the civic society to foster public political participation. According to Kamlage and Nanz (2017, p.3),

There is a major transformation of democracy going on which is bringing up new innovative channels of citizen participation or involvement in politics. Many of the innovations and experiments can be seen as a reaction on the current disaffection, distrust and alienation of people as well as short comes of contemporary representative government.

According to the Kenya Public Participation Policy (2018), There is an increasing recognition that democracy requires much more citizen participation in governance than is ordinarily possible through representation by electoral means. Governments and state agencies have increased efforts to institutionalize new participatory and deliberative processes and representative democracy has been increasingly fused with ideas and practices of participatory democracy; (Escobar: 2014, p. 3, 2017, p. 6). In respect to these facts, what is apparent is that the political community is striving for more space to participate or at least have a say in the governance process. In this regard the Constituency Office would be a laudable platform for constituents pro-active engagement with their MPs in attempt to influence public policy or delivery of constituency related services.

2.5 Mechanisms for Public Democratic Political Participation

In reference to Urbinat (2014), democracy can only be implemented through rules and procedures that regulate and structure the active political participation of the citizens

in a representative framework. This entails that for representative democracy to hold there should be provision for deliberate frameworks that protect and foster active citizen participation in the governance process during and beyond elections. CHRR (2020:19), explicates that, “political participation influences the selection of government and the actions it takes and such can involve voting in elections, engagement with political representatives and demonstrations or citizen actions on the streets to force government action on an issue”. In this respect, there are two dimensions or mechanisms to the vertical exercise of political participation in representative democratic society which are electoral and non-electoral as subsequently expounded.

2.5.1 Electoral Participation

One of the major anchoring pillars of representative democracy is the opportunity for the constituents to elect their representatives in a free and fair competitive electoral process. According to Arnstein (1962), citizen participation as citizen power is suggestive of the fact that people should be in control of their destiny especially through the electoral process. Mesfin (2008), notes that as a pillar of any democratic political system, elections remain undoubtedly the most critical and visible means through which all citizens can peacefully elect or remove leaders. Through the means and mechanism of participating in democratic elections the constituents hold vertical power and authority to either place or dismiss their political representatives.

Warren and Urbinati (2008), advocate that through all forms of electoral representation share three formal features that specify the extent to which they have democratic content. They explicate that in the first place, through elections representatives are authorized to represent those who inhabit geographical constituencies, secondly electoral representation is held to be egalitarian and inclusive mechanism owing to the universal franchise of one vote per person and subsequently and finally elections function to hold representatives accountable for their performance while in office.

In the same light Touchton et al. (2017), explicate that electoral politics is one possible democratic avenue because it permits citizens to select candidates and parties who they believe will represent their interests.

In this context electoral mechanism of participation in a democratic governance process is a fundamental vertical framework that augments citizens ultimate supremacy to influence the power dynamics in a representative political society. Fomenting further on this position, Kayula (2016, p. 6), argues, “Elections represent platform for expressing peoples political decisions and they are a sign of legitimacy for exercise of power. If conducted well, elections call forth and encourage real and active participation by citizens in political and social life”. This entails that election is a critical vertical mechanism for citizenry democratic participation and influence in the democratic governance process.

2.5.2 Non- Electoral Participation

Public political participation in the democratic governance process between MPs and their constituents is made possible beyond electoral means when the constituents have a myriad of other mechanisms to ensure they exert influence on representatives so as to make public policies and decisions that best reflect their ultimate interests. In reference to Schiller (2007:54),

...the most important normative principle in democracy is political equality but, equality of participation which is regarded as a central value should not be restricted to equality of voting to elect representatives rather, participation is to be expanded to wider forms of political expressions and to more areas of social life.

Complimenting further on this position, Gaventa (2005), propagates that democratic deepening concerns not simply the structures and procedures by which democratic governance is exercised but its quality and substance where issues of inclusiveness and participation feature high in deepening democracy which involves active engagement in public affairs of citizens from all social economic segments of the society. The World Bank Group (2014b), posits that an inclusive society must have institutions, structures and processes that empower all groups to participate so they hold their government to account. This entails that elections alone are rendered ineffective mechanism when it comes to influencing and addressing prevailing dissatisfaction over political leadership considering the time gap.

In reference to Tonstensen (2017) and Dath (2021), in a functional representational democracy, there are various means of participatory activities which the constituents can use in order to influence public policy and decisions thereby fostering their interests among others petitioning, lobbying, contact or engagement with political leaders and activism. This provision enables the citizenry who are the constituents in this context not to completely lose their political resources and fall prey to representatives parochial political interests. The period in between elections or a political term might be too long for the constituents to exercise vertical electoral accountability.

According to Touchton (2017), participation including on-going dialogue and deliberation among government officials, individuals and organized actors represent another democratic avenue towards citizenship and these forms of participation occur in multiple avenues such as public hearings, policy conferences and street demonstrations among others. This implies that to sustain democratic political system the citizens should embrace and nurture a civic culture of political participation beyond elections to maximize their interests. In the light of this, it is therefore imperative that the platform of the parliamentary constituency office is paramount in ensuring effective representation by fostering active participation.

Participation does not necessarily imply that politicians will abdicate their independent reasoning and judgement capacity in pursuit of choices that best serve the views and opinions of the represented but rather the interests. In respect to this Coleman (2005, p. 5) reasons,

The public does not expect politicians simply to do what they are told nor do politicians want or expect a public that is simply acquiescent in the face of its electoral representatives higher status or greater knowledge. Whatever they might want on any single issue , what the people feel they deserve from their representatives is to be listened to, to be understood and to be treated with respect.

It is from this perspective therefore the platform of the Improvised Constituency Office among others becomes a relevant framework for exercising and fostering non-electoral participation mechanisms between MPs and their constituents.

2.6 Importance of Public Participation in Governance

Public participation is one of the prime tenets of representative democracy and it is considered one of the critical ingredients to good governance. Lupien (2022, p. 618), argues that “...through participatory mechanisms citizens develop various skills, become better informed and cultivate a greater sense of political efficacy”. According to Kanyinga (2014), participation in public affairs is important because it builds peoples abilities to hold authorities to account for the implementation of decisions and actions agreed upon.

In this regard, Creighton (2005), Golubovic (2010) ,Cornwall (2016) and the UNHRC (2018), posit that citizen participation in democratic governance framework serve several important functions among others; as a matter of principle whereby democratic governments ought to be accountable to their citizens and citizens have the right to be informed, consulted and involved in decisions that have implications on their lives. Secondly, participation provides opportunity and creates conditions necessary for citizens to engage in political life regularly and not only through elections. Further more, political participation creates a framework for citizens to advocate for their legitimate interests and thus contribute to the development of a vibrant democratic society. More also, proactive participation contributes to the quality of adopted public policies and its smooth implementation as evidence suggests that citizens are more inclined to embrace public policy if they have an opportunity of participating in the process of shaping it. This improves political legitimacy of the duty bearers. Lastly, from the human rights perspective, direct and indirect participation in public and political life is important as it plays a crucial role in the promotion of democratic governance, rule of law, social inclusion and economic development as well as in the advancement of human rights.

This implies that the very essence of democratic establishment thrives on citizen capacity to influence decisions that affect their lives hence the ICO ought to provide a platform that fosters a greater degree of constituents’ participation and therefore influence over the democratic governance process.

2.7 The Nexus Between Constituency Offices and Political Participation

Political representation is one of the major pillars of democracies and the institution of the constituency office is but one of the essential frameworks that can offer a platform for fostering effective democratic governance participation especially between MPs and their constituents. Classically, (Dahl;1989; Key, 1961; Pitkins, 1967) as in Koop (2017), advance that the notion democratic theory rests on the perception that political actors learn of and respond to the needs and preferences of the citizens and that representation is achieved in a continuous process which depends on a level of responsiveness to the electorate.

More also Esebagbon (2005, as in Tinka 2021), articulates that democracy can only be sustained when legislatures have the will, ability and information to make decisions that reflect the interests and the needs of the society. He further argues that similarly the governed must have the will, ability and information to transmit their needs and interests to their legislators and to evaluate the performance of their legislators to reward or sanction their actions. According to Johan and Amundisen (2012), the first and foremost role of parliamentarians is vertical in nature and associated with its accountability to the electorate and as such voters or constituents expect that parliamentarians will be accessible, transparent in their business and accountable to them. This therefore implies that the very essence of representative democracy is the idea of citizen participation to ensure policy outcomes and decisions reflect substantive interests of the governed. However, participation in representative democracy is not feasible in absence of personal engagements between the representative and the represented and it may remain an illusion if there is no effective platform for such.

According to Yusufu and Olorundare (2021), the relationship between parliamentarians and their constituents cannot be separated if good governance is considered to exist in a political system and the constituency office serves as a fundamental framework through which both parties constantly interact with each other over critical interests and feedback in a democracy. Kenya's Parliamentary Act (2005), describes constituency office as a formal or non-partisan outlet where a representative and the constituency meet and discuss developmental issues; helps to increase interactions between legislators and the constituents. Further to this, Macleod

(2006), posits that constituency offices stand alone as a local political infrastructure for encounter, recognition and engagement connecting the citizen to the representative and citizen to the state especially between elections.

Emphasizing on the primacy of MPs engagement with the constituents through the constituency office, Yusufu and Olundare (2021, p. 148), assigns as much importance to the constituency office as they explicate;

Government may have failed in its responsibility of providing the needs as constituents demand but such a gap can be bridged through the efforts of a vibrant and regular parliamentary- constituents relationship codified through the framework of constituency office.

This demonstrates the importance of the constituency office as a platform for substantive representation in as far as bridging the representation gap is concerned. The relevance of the existing parliamentary constituency offices therefore, deserve to be studied especially in their role in fostering pro-active constituents participation of in governance thereby narrowing the democratic representation gap between MPs and their constituents. Many at times literature has emphasized on the critical oversight role of the legislature over the executive but negligible effort has been made on the MP/ constituents relationship with regards to active participation or engagement. The CO can therefore become an effective platform for such an encounter.

In reference to the case of functions and operations of the constituency offices in Canada, Macleods (2006), indicate that constituency offices attempt to balance seven core functions which are: To provide service and assistance in dealing with government departments, engage the public, maintain presence in the community, provide informal counselling on personal and professional matters, act as brokers and mediators between interests and collate local opinion. This demonstrates that the institution of the parliamentary constituency office is very critical framework for facilitating efficient engagement between MPs and their constituents. By its very formal design and operations it brings the tentacles of government power and influence closer to the people and collect feedback for improved public service delivery.

Okereke et al. (2018), further compliments that constituency offices contribute to effective representation in that they provide constituents the necessary avenue to incorporate their community aspirations and needs into national policy or legislation.

Minnie (2005, p. 64), argues that “democracy implies developing generally accepted set of values that ensure representation, accountability, inclusiveness, transparency gender equality, political tolerance and participation among others”. The general ideation is that in democracy, the MPs represent the interests of the constituents and as such must justify their actions in relation to exercise of the vested powers. According to Ackermann (2005), the conduct of free and fair elections in a democratic society is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the establishment of good governance and the rule of law especially after elections. A vibrant formal structure or platform like a PCO therefore may provide a conducive platform for civic participation especially between constituents and their MPs.

As a way of proceeding Strom et al. (2006), pinpoint that political delegation or representation is inherently risky as it may turn out in abdication that the person who delegates may lose control rather than get help. As a result, delegation to politicians needs to be coupled with some non-electoral participation mechanisms which political duty bearers should be subjected to. It is therefore imperative that the constituents should take a proactive role in holding their MPs to account in relation to delivery of their electoral promises, social expectations and interests. Much as the recall provision in section 64 of the constitution was repealed, proactive accountability mechanisms and participatory platforms might be necessary to ensure effective representation and articulation of interests. This might as well insulate the constituents from political entrepreneurs who are solely motivated by myopic personal interests over the common good hence the constituency offices might probably provide such a platform.

2.8 Constituents Participation in Africa

The concept of constituency office is one of the critical frameworks that makes participation and accountability feasible hence good governance possible particularly in the representative democratic society. According to Gaventa (2002), there is a growing global political crisis of legitimacy characterizing the relationship between

citizens, institutions and representatives as a result of lack of responsiveness and the absence of the sense of connectedness with elected representatives.

The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG:2007:12), recognizes the significance of participation in public affairs as an essential element of democracy. It stipulates that;

The charter defines the content and the parameters of democratic values and ethos that African countries agreed was common to them which are to promote and to strengthen good governance through the institutionalization of transparency, accountability and participatory democracy of which elections and governance are key elements. By adopting this instrument, the African countries defined democratic standards for themselves and made inclusion and participation key elements.

The charter further propagates that the African Union (AU) member states should consider peoples active participation in the governance process as an inalienable right.

In the same light, Yinka et al. (2021), governance in a democratic system is anchored on the informed and active participation of the people and that the input of the people during decision making process not only ascribes legitimacy to the government but also gives the citizens a sense of belonging. This is one of the reasons some countries in Africa have institutionalized constituency offices in attempt to improve representative-constituents relationship thereby enhancing information and knowledge based participation in the governance process. Such countries which are to be discussed subsequently are Zimbabwe which is running what is called Parliamentary Constituency Information Centers (PCIC) and Zambia which is implementing Parliamentary Constituency Offices (PCOs).

2.8.1 Constituents Participation in Zimbabwe

According to Munyoro (2010), with funding from development partners the parliament of Zimbabwe adopted a number of reforms amongst which was the establishment of the Parliamentary Constituency Information Centers (PCIC).

It began as a pilot project in the year 2002 and currently all constituencies have offices under the provision of parliament. The reform was a self-realization by MPs and response to concerns by stakeholders that parliament was a remote institution that was not responsive to public needs as the MPs themselves were invincible in between elections only to resurface during election time. The main problem identified was lack of access to parliamentary information to members of the public which hindered informed participation in the democratic governance process. The initiative aimed to improve consultation between legislators and their constituents and thereby empowering the citizens with regards to parliamentary issues so that they will be able to participate in the democratic process for the national development.

According to Munyoro (2010), capturing the then speaker of the Zimbabwe parliament Rt. Hon. Munangagwa articulates,

The representative function of any parliamentary democracy is the primary objective of any popular assembly, It is identified with the expression of the popular will and representation of all the people through universal suffrage and more importantly with the fundamental duties of MPs to look after the interests of their constituencies. As a legislator you will realize that you need mechanisms for consulting with your constituents and involving them in the decision making at constituency level.

In a subsequent study done by Munyoro (2015), examining the impact of the PCIC it was established that in reference to the degree of satisfaction in terms of services delivered at the center and bridging the democratic gap between MPs and their constituents most users were satisfied showing an aggregate of 62%.

2.8.2 Constituents Participation in Zambia

In a related case, Zambia has established and is running parliamentary constituency offices across all political constituencies throughout the country. According to Kashimbi (2015), through the Parliamentary Committee on Reforms (2000), in attempt to improve Member- constituency relations and taking parliament closer to the people, it was recommended that the constituency offices be established across all 150 constituencies. Currently all the constituencies have offices most of which are

located in either local government buildings or rented apartments. In a study by Kashimbi (2015), analyzing the impact of the parliamentary constituency offices with regards to constituents engagement it was established that there is a great improvement in Parliamentarian-Constituents relations such that personal contact with the MP had increased with 20% thereby fostering constituents pro-active participation in the democratic governance process. Among others

According to CARITAS Zambia (2006) as quoted by Kashimbi (2015) among others, the functions of a constituency office are:

- i. To improve and develop MP/ constituents relations through improved communication and outreach programmes.
- ii. It is an interface platform between the MPs and their constituent
- iii. It serves as an information center in the constituency where citizens may find valuable and informative literature such as parliamentary debates.
- iv. Provide platform for effective information dissemination and sharing between MPs and their constituents and in-turn between parliament and their citizen.
- v. Brings parliament to the people.

Generally, the structure of a parliamentary constituency office has facilitated significant increase in MP-constituents interaction therefore participation levels in the governance framework. This has likely increased constituents trust and therefore legitimacy in their political leadership.

2.8.3 Constituents Participation in Malawi: From Dictatorship to Democracy

Malawi received political independence from British colonial rule in 1964. However, from 1964 up to 1994 president Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) employed every mechanism to stifle the civic space and consolidate long term political power. According to Mazengera (2008), Banda not only banned other political parties, he discouraged and punished dissent or any form of liberal political participation such that any who attempted to voice their contrary opinion were punished through detention without trial or exile among other mechanisms. Political power was absolutely centralized and patrimonial mechanisms of control were at play as Cullen (1994:12) puts it, “it was clear there was few if any limits to Banda’s

veracious appetite for power, his object was to exercise precise control over the entire political, juridical and economic life of a nation and its people”. This implied absolute control over the citizenry who were more of his subjects rather than citizens of a civilized political society.

Hussein (2004), explicates that Banda appointed and dissolved parliament at will and it therefore divested itself of the task of being the representative of the popular will and became a rubber stamp for the executive arm of government. Furthermore, in the light of Chigona (2011), under the one party rule, people were expected to accept a high degree of social, political and economic control at the same time offer a unanimous political loyalty. He advances that this practice, meant erosion of political space for the masses to exercise their rights, bureaucratic reproduction of laws rather than popular participation which is the core of political representation. There were no formal party constituency offices where the constituents would easily reach out to their appointed duty bearers apart from district offices and most at times people engaged party structures leadership such as at Area, branch, youth league among others.

However, following the re-adoption of multiparty democracy after the 1993 referendum president Banda was ousted out of power in the elections that took place in May 1994, (Magolowondo:2009). According to Mazengera (2008), the new constitution made provision for democratic governance and enshrined the rights of every individual to be heard. In reference to Tambulasi et al (2007), following the democratic political dispensation, citizen participation is constitutionally guaranteed as the citizens have the right to vote in elections which means they can hold their political representative accountable and that they have the right to form and join any other association; political or non-political. They further explicate that non-state actors such as CSOs and the media thrived and aligned with the civic masses and that is the people themselves.

Chiweza (2022, p. 26) further illuminates that in 1998 Malawi adopted a democratic decentralization policy whose main objective was to create a democratic environment and institutions in Malawi for governance and development at the local level and was meant to facilitate the participation of the grass root in decision making. She promulgates that among the rationales for decentralization initiative was public

participation and democratization. This entails that people at grass root level should be enabled to have a voice and influence of the decision making process in their areas therefore exercising control over their political representatives. The program was also to facilitate political education among constituents so that they are able to acquire and develop skills in policy making, conflict resolution and allocation of resources at local level.

Further to this, the Malawi Vision 2063 agenda National Planning Commission NPC (2020), stipulates that Malawi shall have governance systems and institutions that are effective and efficient enough to deliver the aspirations of an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant nation guided by the key principles of good governance that include citizen engagement and participation, accountability, responsiveness, transparency among others. This entails that Malawi civic space has been widening since the reintroduction of the democratic representative political system accommodating values such as public participation in the governance process. This denotes that the electorate as in constituents have civic obligation to exercise mechanisms that enable them to actively participate in influencing public decisions that determine their social, political and economic destinies beyond elections. The MPs are therefore obliged to respond substantively and supply the much needed services. The institution of the Improvised constituency offices across the political spectrum should entail more engagement between the MPs and their constituents hence more elements of participatory democracy fused into the existing representative democratic framework.

The intriguing question is; how effective are the Improvised Constituency Offices in fostering constituents proactive participation in the democratic governance process beyond elections? Chinsinga and Kayuni (2010), articulate that in a vibrant liberal democracy, there is a vibrant electorate that does not shy away from engaging itself in political issues such that it takes to task the elected representatives and hold them accountable for every decision made. However, for this to be feasible Modise (2017, p. 2), explicates, “...there ought to be structures for people to consult and voice their problems right from the streets, wards and local communities and the selection of these structures need to be done very carefully so that they represent the people rather than officials and politicians”. The platform of the constituency office therefore should create a favorable atmosphere for the constituents to actively participate in

democratic governance beyond elections. This implies that in the absence of effective institutional frameworks that create conducive forums for political participation such as a Constituency Offices proactive citizenry political participation may be adversely impacted.

2.9 Theoretical Underpinning

2.9.1 Institutionalism and New Institutional Theories

According to Scott (1995), there is no single universally agreed definition of institution in the institutional school of thought. North (1990, p. 5), defines institutions as, “the framework within which human interactions take place”. He further posits that institutions are rules of the game in a society or more formerly, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. Scott (1995, p. 33; 2001, p. 48), further asserts that “institutions are social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience and provide stability and meaning to social life”. Etymologically, according to Bell (2002), new institutionalism theory developed in the USA following the end of the second world war. North (1990; 1996), further postulate that since then, there has been a proliferation of institutional approach to the basic questions in disciplines such as politics, sociology and economics among others and generally institutionalism has become an organizing theory for political science.

There are basically two main schools of institutional theory which are Old Institutionalism and New Institutionalism. Schmidt (2014), and Kraft (2007), postulate that old institutionalism is the core of the early political science studies of the formal and legal institutions of government as the only source of power and influence. Explicating further, March and Olsen (1989) and Lowndes (2001), posit that in political science, the theory argues that the organization of political life makes a difference and assert a more autonomous role for the institutions in shaping political behavior. On the other hand, according to Scott (2008), New Institutionalism theory concerns itself with informal conventions as well as formal rules and structures, they pay attention to the way in which institutions embody values and power relationships and the impact of institutions upon behavior and interactions between individuals and institutions. The theory watered down the so called ‘old institutionalism’ which

focused on formal/ government institutions as the only sources of political power and behavior and instead argues that political behavior and the sources of political power derived primarily through informal relationship within and beyond the institutions of government.

March and Olsen (1984; 1989; 1996), Longstrength (1992), Huntington (1965; 1968), Peters, (2000), among others categorize some general approaches to institutionalism which are;

Normative approach: Argues that peoples functioning / behavior within the institution is shaped by normative standards which are major social repositories of value.

Historical institutionalism: The approach posits that policy and structural choices made at the inception of institution will have a persistent influence over its behavior for the remainder of its existence. The emphasis is on the principle of path dependency.

Rational choice: The underlying logic asserts that institutions are arrangement of rules and incentives deliberately crafted to serve well ordered sets of individual preferences.

Empirical Institutionalism: The approach argues that institutions must intermediate between the generation of demands in society and the government itself. This strikes the balance between policy choices and political stability.

In the context of this particular study, the platform of the Improvised Constituency Offices represent an informal avenue of engagement between the MPs and their constituents. The nature of operations of this platform has the potential to influence political attitudes and behaviors between constituents and their duty bearers MPs in particular, thereby affecting their power relations dynamics in the democratic governance framework. The MPs in this regard, have the potential to use constituency offices as platforms for maximizing their political mobilization interests as well as a platform for mutual exchange of critical information pertaining to national policy or constituency related services. On the other hand, constituents have the potential to use these avenues as platforms for fostering and influencing the MP to be responsive to their interests as well as access to critical information. This implies that the platform of the improvised constituency office remains one of the critical political institution

with the potential consolidate democracy as well as peddle rational interests of both parties.

The opportunities for formal and informal contestations at the platform of the constituency offices are necessary for enhancing a culture of constituents proactive participation in governance. In principle, New institutionalism theory augurs well with the primacy of this study as it explicates the nexus between the role of ICOs as informal institutions that have the potential to influence the dynamics of power relations between MPs and their constituents thereby increasing constituents proactive participation beyond elections. In line with this perspective, Schneider & Ershova (2018), argue that institutions in their formal and informal state guide the choices of voters, governments and other relevant actors based on the interplay of three factors that determine the choice of decision makers which are; institutions, interests and information. He advances that institutions are important because they shape and constrain political behavior, decision making, perceptions and powers of political actors in a wide range of ways.

2.10 Conclusion

The chapter has reviewed diverse literature pertaining to the topic of study. The review of such literature has shown that public political participation through relevant institutional frameworks such as the constituency office is the core to the survival and quality of representative democracy both at global and national level. The roles played by formal and informal institutional mechanisms facilitate public political participation beyond elections leading to substantive representation thereby in turn government being responsive to the interests and expectations of the constituents. The literature has explicated on democratic context and trends of political participation in representative democracy, mechanisms for public participation, importance of public political participation in governance, the nexus between constituency offices and public participation, public political participation from the global perspective to the Malawian context and the theoretical underpinning informing the study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The chapter outlines the methodology that was used in gathering information related to the topic under study. Specifically, the chapter outlines the different strategies that the researcher employed in collecting the data. It gives particular attention to concepts such as research design, population of the study, sampling techniques, data collection tools, data analysis, ethical considerations, validity and reliability. The concepts were used to obtain the relevant data and interpret it to reflect the research question.

3.2 Research Design and Sampling

According to Arezina (2018), research design refers to the strategy chosen to integrate the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way, thereby ensuring effective address of the research problem. It constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement and analysis of data. In a similar manner, Silverman (2004), explicates that a research design is an overall plan that will help researchers to get the answers that they need Hanry (1977), further describes research design as not only anticipation and specification of seemingly countless decisions connected with carrying out data collection, processing an analysis but it presents a logical basis for these decisions. According to Reiter (2017), qualitative research method implies the collection of non-numerical data which is meant to interpret meaning based on specific objectives or themes. This method was identified because largely the study focused on extracting an in-depth understanding regarding the significance of Improvised Constituency Office as a platform for fostering constituents participation in the democratic governance process.

This study utilized exploratory research questions to collect empirical data, which was supplemented by relevant secondary data as explained in the data collection section below. The approach fits well with the study objective and question as it extracts views and opinions from diverse experiences and knowledge of participants.

3.2.1 A Brief Background of Zomba Malosa and Balaka North Constituencies

Zomba Malosa and Balaka North constituencies are found in the southern administrative and eastern political region of Malawi. According to MEC (2019), Zomba Malosa had a total of 28, 618 registered voters as of 2019 parliamentary elections. The incumbent MP for the constituency belongs to the main opposition and former ruling party the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The MP is a fulltime resident of the constituency. She operates a constituency office located in a rented building at Songani trading center which was opened in the year 2020. The office has no set standard operation procedures but it operates on working days from around 9 am to 4 pm and the personal secretary to the MP is responsible for daily operations. The office structure is not branded in partisan party colors. All constituency cases are recorded in a constituency diary for record and follow up purposes by the MP. On the other hand, the incumbent MP for Balaka North constituency is independent. He operates two constituency offices one located in a rented building within Balaka township and the other at the MP's residence which is about 15 km away. Both offices are not branded in partisan colors or symbols. However, both offices are rarely open for public business. Balaka north was considered to be part of this study on the hypothesis that since the MP is independent constituents' from diverse political and social background would easily reach out and participate in the governance process. According to MEC (2019), the total registered voters as of 2019 parliamentary elections was 39, 908.

3.3.1 Population and Sampling Methods

3.3.1.1 Population of the Study

Study population refers to individual or institutions from which study sample will be drawn (Silverman, 2004). The population for this study comprised office of the clerk of parliament, academia, MPs and political party representatives, civil society organizations (CSOs)/Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) officials and members of the Focus Study Groups which were composed of traditional leaders at Traditional Authority (TA) level, party representatives, youth and women representatives, farmers and business community representatives. The Focus Study Groups were composed of individuals extracted at grass root level in the targeted constituencies.

3.3.1.2 Sampling and Sample Size

Sampling in qualitative research can be defined as “the selection of specific data sources from which data are collected to address the research objectives” (Gentles et al., 2015, p. 1775). Since this was a qualitative study, it was not possible to determine an exact sample size, according to Gentles et al (2015, p. 1782), a qualitative sample size is difficult to predetermine unlike a quantitative sample because in qualitative study a representative size is critical for generalization, however this study aimed at achieving “analytic generalizability”. The sample of this study was guided by data saturation limit which according to Gentles (2015, p. 1781), “refers to reaching a point of informational redundancy where additional data collection contributes little or nothing new to the study”. The study used two non-probability sampling techniques (purposive and snowball sampling). Purposive sampling is a method whereby respondents are selected based on the sound judgment of the researcher that those selected possess unique characteristics or qualities (due to their social position or experience) that may significantly contribute to the study’s information required (Train, 2016). On the other hand, snowballing involves primary sources suggesting other potential sources of information (Silverman, 2004). The data collection exercise largely relied on Snow bowling especially in composition of FSGs.

3.3.1.3 Sampling of the Office of the Clerk of Parliament

The office of the clerk of parliament was very crucial to the research because it was necessary to find out if at all they have knowledge of the existence of Improved Constituency offices, its operations, whether there has been interest by successive governments to formalize such offices in the past and what have been the stumbling blocks to such attempts and if at all there are prospects for such in the near future.

3.3.1.4 Sampling for Civil Society Organizations/ Non- Governmental Organizations

The study engaged representatives from Democracy International Malawi (DI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI). The two NGOs were deliberately selected based on their activities and programs in democratic governance. They have programs in inclusive politics, human rights, democratic governance, responsive legislation and parliamentary support activities that strengthen democratic representation. These activities are relevant to the study hence provide critical information.

3.3.1.5 Sampling for Politicians

The study involved two incumbent MPs who run the target constituency offices. Their experiences in running the affairs of the constituency offices is very essential for the study objectives. Through an encounter with the MPs some successes and limitations have been uncovered.

3.3.1.6 Sampling for Academia

Academicians were intentionally selected as key participants of this study due to their intellect and knowledge of political governance in Malawi. Participants of this study from the academia include a lecturer in political leadership at the Catholic University of Malawi (CUNIMA) and one from the University of Malawi Department of Politics and Government.

3.3.1.7 Sampling for Focus Study Groups.

The two FSGs one for each constituency were composed of a Traditional Authority, ADC representative, political party representatives, women and youth representatives, business persons and ordinary farmers. Majority of the participants in the FSGs were ordinary constituents from diverse social positions, ages and gender. One Focus Group Discussion session was conducted for each FSG lasting for a period of approximately 40 minutes.

Table 4: Sampled respondents for Focus Study Groups (FSG)

Member designation	Total
Political representatives (DPP,UDF,MCP, Independent)	7
ADC representatives	2
Traditional Leaders (T/As)	2
Youth Representatives	4
Women Representatives	4
Business Community Representatives	4
Farmers Representatives	4
Total	27

Source: Field Study (March: 2023)

Table 5: Sampled respondents for in-depth Interviews

CSOs	Academicians	Civil Servant	Politicians	Total Respondents
National Democratic Institute (NDI) Programs Officer Democracy International Programs coordinator. Total: 2	A lecturer in the department of Political and administrative studies, UNIM A. Lecturer in the Department of Political Leadership, Catholic University of Malawi Total: 2	Office of the Clerk of Parliament Total: 1	Members of Parliament Total: 2 Constituency Staff: 2	Total : 9

Source: *Field Study (March:2023)*

Table 6: Demographic information of the sampled respondents

Characteristic		Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	23	63.88
	Female	13	36.02
	Total	36	100
Age range	18-35	17	47.22
	36-50	11	30.50
	50+	9	25
		36	100
Education	Primary	9	25
	Secondary	19	50
	College/University	9	25
	Total	36	100
Designation	ADC reps.	2	5.5
	Civil servant	1	2.5
	MP	2	5.5
	Civil society leader	2	5.5
	Academicians	2	5.5
		2	5.5
		4	

	Traditional leader	4	11
	Youth reps.	4	11
	Women reps.	7	11
	Business comm.		19.33
	Ordinary farmers	36	100
	Party representative		
	Total		

Source: Fieldwork (March 2023)

3.4 Data Collection

For primary and secondary data, this study has used Focus Group Discussions, Key Informant Interviews and review of literature. Their corresponding tools are explained below.

3.4.1 In-depth Interviews

According to Knott et al. (2022), an interview is a specific type of interaction in which usually and predominantly a researcher asks questions about someone's life experience, opinions, dreams, fears and hopes and the interview participant answers the questions. They further posit that in-depth interviews are therefore a qualitative research method that follow familiar logic of human interactions or conversations where people talk with each other interact and pose and answer questions. Pamella et al. (2023, p. 1), explicates that, "the purpose of in-depth interviews is to get detailed information that sheds light on an individual's perspective and the perceived meaning about a particular topic, issues or process".

A semi-structured interview guide was used for collecting data during the interviews with some key participants that included office of the Clerk of Parliament, MPs, academicians, improvised constituency office staff and CSO representatives. A voice recorder was used in order not to miss points that were used during the discussions in the interviews. The interviews gave the researcher enough time to go through questions and probe on issues that emerged during the discussions with the

respondents. The probing gave the researcher an opportunity to fully understand some events and experiences that the respondents were relating. The prime goal was to obtain qualitative description of perceptions or experiences rather than measuring aspects of the experiences. The face to face interview using semi-structured interview guide and took a length of time as it involved getting an understanding of the emotions, deep feelings and values of the respondents with regards to the relevance of the Improvised Constituency Offices.

3.4.2 Review of Documents

The researcher reviewed some secondary data or literature from diverse sources. These sources include Constituency Diaries, published materials like books and journal articles, electronic and print media as well as internet sources, archival documents and statistical publications among others. The review enriched the primary data unearthed in this study.

3.4.3 Focus Group Discussions

According to Gill.K et al. (2008, p. 293), “ a focus group is a group of discussions on a particular topic organized for research purposes”. They posit that the purpose of research interview is to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and/ or motivations of individuals on specific matters. The researcher held two Focus Group Discussions for one for each target constituency which lasted for approximately 40 minutes each. The sessions intended to extract ordinary constituents perceptions on the significance of the operations of the ICOs with regards to their potential to foster constituents proactive participation in the democratic governance system. The sessions enriched the study findings with relevant primary data. The researcher used semi-structured interview guide which provided some kind of guidance to the participants on what to talk about. The respondents were asked to be as broad and as flexible as possible in sharing their experiences.

3.5 Population and Sampling Methods

3.4.3 Sampling Technique: Non-Probability Purposeful Sampling

The study utilized non-probability sampling technique namely purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a technique widely used in a qualitative research for the identification and selection of information rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources, (Patton, 2002). In line with Crosswell and Clark (2011), this involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. The general assumption is that the category has broad knowledge and social experience necessary for the research topic of study. Based on these premises the study engaged a combination of experts and widely experienced individuals at grass root constituency level. Their combination present a good moderation of expertise and experiences which are fundamentally responsive to the study objectives.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a process that seeks to reduce and make sense of the vast amounts of information from different sources. Flick (2014 in Merriam & Tisdell 2016:195), describe data analysis as “classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning making in the material and what is represented in it”. In this context, complex primary and secondary data mobilized in this research have been systematically collated to best serve the prime objectives of the research.

The researcher used Interpretation Analysis to process and analyze the data that was collected from interviews. The audio recordings were transcribed for analysis. The researcher had to categorize the respondents into groups of their occupation and drew tables for each group to draw out commonalities. This allowed the researcher to identify dominant themes from each group relevant to the study and relate them to the objectives and the research question. The themes from each group were then rounded up and presented as findings of the research. The method was rewarding to the researcher as the common themes were easily adopted from each interview and then a conclusion regarding that particular theme made. In addition, Content Analysis was

used for analyzing data that was collected through review of relevant documents. This enabled the researcher to ably engage with both primary and secondary literature concisely responding to issues that were appealing to the research objective and question.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

In the first place, the proposal framework for this academic work was cleared by the University of Malawi Political and Administrative studies department. This necessitated that the methodology and approach engaged are considered ethically appropriate. In addition, an informed consent was sought from the participants before any data extracted from them. The topic and the aim of the study was fully explained to the individual and group participants in order to have full knowledge on what the research was all about. Participants were told about their rights and were at liberty to participate or not and were free to withdraw at any stage during the investigations. Confidentiality was guaranteed within and beyond the exercise. The content will not be used for any other purpose other than academic.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

The researcher is confident of the research findings being valid and reliable as the study was done professionally, whereby, self-interests was not the determinant of doing this research but to fill the gap in the academia on the topic; Examining the relevance of constituency offices as a platform for constituents participation in democratic governance process in Malawi. Thus, the reliability and validity was achieved.

3.8 Study Limitations

The study encountered two main challenges. In the first place it was not easy to secure an interview with the office of the clerk of parliament and MPs of the study areas as they were reportedly very preoccupied with parliament business. However, they responded to the pre-drafted questionnaires far much later which affected the data collection time frame. Secondly, the study has been conducted just in two political constituencies hence the findings may not be generalized. However, the scope of respondents was widely casted to capture as diverse views as possible so that the

findings reflect the general public impression.

3.9 Conclusion

The chapter has outlined the research design which is qualitative in nature. The chapter further explained the population and how it was identified and, how data was collected and analyzed in order to establish the findings. A total of 9 interviews were conducted with various experts, political and opinion leaders. Two Focus Group Discussions one for each Focus Study Group were held with a total of 26 participants for a period of approximately 50 minutes. The study followed all ethical considerations making it valid and reliable.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is primarily to make a presentation and analysis of qualitative data gathered in this study. The data specifically pertains to an analysis of the relevance of the relevance of ICOs as a platform for constituents participation in the democratic governance process. The findings have been synthesized into three main thematic areas which are; mechanisms used by constituents in attempt to engage their MPs, constituents awareness or knowledge levels on the existence and functions of the MP and ICOs and as well as operations of the ICOs in context of their relevance in fostering constituents non-electoral political participation.

The prime focus of the study was not necessarily to examine the forms or acts of non-electoral participation exercised by constituents in the democratic governance framework. The intention was rather to study the effectiveness of the participatory atmosphere at the ICO with respect to fostering constituents active participation in the democratic governance process. The study engaged Focus Study Groups (FSGs) which were composed of traditional leaders, political party representatives, women, youth, business and farming community representatives from the grass root. In-depth Interviews were also carried out with the academia, CSO/ NGO representatives, MPs, Office of the Clerk of Parliament and ICO staff. The enabled the researcher to extract deeply reflected and quality information based on both technical knowledge and vast experience.

4.2 Mechanisms Used by Constituents to Engage their MPs

The study has revealed that apart from the ICOs, there are a myriad of other formal and informal or direct and indirect mechanisms and avenues through which constituents attempt to reach out to their MPs and engage them on individual or collective expectations and interests beyond elections.

These mechanisms and avenues include use of diverse media platforms, direct phone calls, letters, political and social structures, social gatherings and public meetings. Generally, majority of the respondents expressed desire for a much more broader engagement opportunities with their MPs on matters of both constituency and national policy concern.

4.2.2 Use of Media Platforms

According to OECD (2014), in wide variety of contexts, the media have a key role to play in informing individuals, providing an inclusive and critical platform for public debate; stimulating interpersonal communication and ultimately ensuring that policy making benefits a greater number of people. The study has revealed that to a large extent, constituents engage various media platforms in attempt to attract the attention of their MP on constituency interests and expectations. Some constituents use radio phone-in programs that set the agenda on different pertinent social and political issues. They usually express their concerns with regards to delivery of constituency related services or policy position with the hope that it will reach to their MPs and they will respond accordingly.

To this effect a constituent said;

Since the MP is rarely available and accessible for candid engagement I take advantage of radio phone in programs and express my disaffection towards collective plight of the constituency such as hunger situation, poverty and poor public infrastructure among others. Unfortunately I have never received any direct feedback from the MP on any pertinent issues raised through radio phone in programs but at least I have an opportunity to express my mind.

It was further unearthed that a few respondents especially the youth politically participate by engaging or expressing their opinion through social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp forums. Drury (2008), describes social media as an online resource that helps people share content: video, photos, images, ideas, insight, humor, opinion, gossip and news. These forums or groups are specifically for the constituency or the district at large. Most at times the MPs or their agents are members of such groups and as such when constituents raise any constituency or national policy concerns they normally secure feedback. Unfortunately it was established that fewer constituents have access to radios, advanced mobile phones and necessary digital media literacy to participate effectively through these platforms. These findings are in tandem with NSO (2020), findings which established that access and use of internet services via fixed or mobile network in Malawi lies at 9.9% and as low as 5.9% in rural areas. In a related study, Massimo and Mutsvairo (2017, p.16), argued that, "...the potential to digital participation in Malawi is plagued by lack of technological infrastructure as well as the powerful presence of debilitating digital divide which is illustrated along gender, economic status and location". This implies that both the electronic and social media platforms might not be as effective due to a myriad of challenges largely bordering on access and infrastructure among other bottlenecks.

4.2.3 Direct Phone Calls

The study revealed that some constituents have or know someone who has the mobile phone number of the MP and as such they at times make direct phone calls to the MP in attempt to attract his/ her attention on individual or collective constituency interests such as emergencies. Majority of the participants indicated that the MP rarely picks calls from strange mobile numbers or when he does always promises to come back of which it never happens. Reportedly only in few circumstances does the MP intervene and address the matter or make a referral. To this effect some MP said;

I receive phone calls from all angles of the constituency 24/7 and if I do not switch off my handset I rarely sleep peacefully at night. On average I take 20 calls from constituents every day asking me to intervene on political, social, development and private matters. It is

almost impossible to meet up to the expectations and interests of the constituents.

Generally it was observed that most constituents lack the interest to make such initiative on the assumption that MPs do not take their concerns seriously. The study found out that a substantive number of constituents attempt to directly reach out to their representatives by phone calls. Even though some of them manage to get hold of their MP many bemoaned that they do not usually pick their calls, promise to come back in a moment which never happens or they never respond to their interests or requests. It was further established that specifically majority of rural residents have no access to mobile phones which they can use to reach out to their duty bearers. According to NSO (2020), with regards to ownership and use of mobile phones by individuals about 43.2 % of Malawians own and use mobile phone out of which only 37.3% are in the rural areas while 72.3% are in the urban settings. This entails that matters of accessibility and use of mobile phone technologies become a stumbling block to effective constituents political participation particularly in between elections. However, some respondents who physically visit and register their concerns through the Improvised Constituency Office reported receiving feedback and referral from the MP through direct phone calls.

4.2.4 Writing Letters

In the ever growing digital era, writing letters as a mechanism of communication is fast becoming outdated. However, the study has revealed that in attempt to reach out and engage their MPs on a particular problem or interest some constituents submit written letters to their MPs. These letters are normally hand delivered at the MPs constituency residence or family members, political or party structures of the MP, traditional leaders and other social leaders on assumption that they will deliver them whenever the MP is available in the constituency. Among others, the kinds of requests and petitions raised in these letters are sponsorship on public events such as sporting activities particularly for the youth, secondary school academic scholarships for economically vulnerable students, invitation to social and religious events such as weddings, cultural festivals and fundraising activities among others.

According to one MP involved in the study;

Every time I visit the constituency there is a bunch of letters from the constituents most of which are request for attention on either personal or collective financial support. I usually intervene to the best of my capacity for the sake of maintain political capital. Rarely do constituents peddle community interests such as public services.

This implies that majority attempts by the constituents to engage their representative through letter writing are based on extraction of financial benefits rather than articulation or contribution towards national policy issues or influence on delivery of collective constituency related services. This is generally as a result of constituents ignorance on the duties and functions of the MPs, abject poverty in the political society and unrealistic constituents' expectations due to unrealistic political campaign promises by the duty bearers themselves.

4.2.5 Political and Social Structures

The study has found out that a substantial number of constituents engage their social and political leaders such as traditional leaders, political structures for the incumbent MPs and decentralization structures such as Area Development Committees (ADCs) in attempt to connect or relay their interests to the MP. Traditional leaders appear to be the most trusted agents connecting constituents' interests to their MPs due to factors such as accessibility, inclusiveness, probity and responsiveness. They are most at times delegated to articulate constituency interests and expectations before the MP and where possible influence the allocation of values.

The study also found out that some constituents engage political structures of the incumbent MP in attempt to bring their plight to the attention of the representative. They usually engage a constituency governor or chairperson who is easily accessible on a constituency problem requiring the intervention of the office of the MP. Some constituents interests successfully attract the attention and responsiveness of the MP while majority are usually ignored on political affiliation grounds. To this effect some constituent bemoaned;

Usually, the political party leadership and the MP himself pay much

attention to the needs and interests of loyal patronage than the rest of us. Once they identify you or any of your close family members to belong to another party they do not attend to you unless you're prepared to publicly switch your allegiance otherwise forget. Some orphans are left on CDF scholarship beneficiary and some members are excluded from Village Savings Groups that benefit directly from CDF on political grounds.

Political structures by their design and operations are exclusively driven by partisan political mobilization interests and as such whenever a constituent who is deemed not to be the supporter of the incumbent expresses a community interest he/she is not given the necessary attention.

4.2.6 Conclusion

Generally, the section has presented and discussed findings on mechanisms and avenues through which constituents use in their attempt to participate in the democratic governance framework beyond elections by among others engaging their MPs. This is done with the intention to influence the delivery of constituency related services and public policy position where necessary. The study has revealed that constituents use various media platforms, direct phone calls to MPs, writing letters and engaging political and social structures. The findings expose that much as these vertical mechanisms and avenues promote constituents opportunity to proactively participate in the democratic governance process by influencing policy direction and interests there is a lot more to desire. It was realized that majority of the respondents felt that these structures are compromised by their very design, and mode of operations which is exclusive, inaccessible, unresponsive and weak such that they end up not conducive for every member of the political constituency to initiate candid engagement with the MP.

4.3 Awareness on Existence and Functions of the MP and Improvised Constituency Offices.

The section explores constituents awareness levels with regards to knowledge of the MP, awareness on roles of MP and Improvised Constituency Offices and functions of the constituency office.

4.3.1 Knowledge of the MP

In the first place, all the respondents in this study acknowledged the existence of their incumbent MP in one way or the other. They recognized and identified him by name, political party affiliation, family background and home village, academic and career background, constituency related activities and services that have been delivered and assessment of his performance so far with respect to engagement with the constituents. The findings allude to the fact that all the respondents were fully aware of their representatives. This information helped to easily connect the MP to the operations of the Improvised constituency offices. Some party loyalist alluded to this fact, “The MP is one of the most popular public figure in this constituency, through various political, development and social forums he has made himself identifiable enough among the constituents”. This is a very critical information considering that the study is dealing with the MP- constituents relationship in reference to participation in the democratic governance process at the platform of the constituency office.

4.3.2 Roles of Member of Parliament

According to Omotola (2014), the functions of the legislators are defined in terms of legislation or law making, horizontal oversight, representation and delivery of constituency related services which are mostly in terms of tangible benefits. In the similar manner, with respect of this study, the functions are categorized into legislation, oversight, representation and delivery of constituency related services such as public and private goods and services. The study has revealed that almost a substantial majority of the respondents over and above everything, expect their MP to be a catalyst for development by securing financial resources that will ensure improvement of their welfare through delivery of tangible public goods and services

like infrastructure among others. Complementing on this position a constituent explains;

The primary convincing premise for electing our MP is on the basis of his electoral campaign promises to deliver tangible development and improve social welfare services in this constituency which are a dire concern for the rural poor masses that hold the largest political capital. The MPs political career prospects are subject to this, there is no alternative.

This demonstrates that the MP-constituents relationship is largely vertical in nature and any MP who ignores the constituents interests in terms of delivering tangible constituency related services over national cause risks his or her political career prospects. They expect that their MP should be able to secure and attract resources that will be invested in the critical social sectors for the overall tangible benefit of the constituents. Secondly, a number of respondents indicated that the primary duty of their MP is legislation or law making while the least indicated representation and oversight functions respectively.

The findings reveal that majority constituents expectations and therefore interests are shaped by the capacity of the MP to deliver constituency related services over and above every other formal functions such as representation, oversight and legislative articulations. Although the prime formal role of MPs is legislation, from the constituents perspective delivery of tangible constituency services is the core duty of the MP that determine the prospects of the social contract between constituents who are the electorate and incumbent MPs. These findings corroborate with a study conducted in Nigeria by Yinka et al. (2019), which revealed that Nigerians are not interested in asking the legislators about their floor voting or their stand on issues of national policy importance. Rather, they are mostly interested in what they can get in terms of material and tangible benefits from the legislators.

According to Samuels and Shugart (2003, p. 3), representation is defined as “the relationship between citizens interests and political outcomes in which rulers act to

meet the interests of the public”. In this context MPs as political representatives are obliged to do everything within their means to meet and satisfy constituents interests so that their career prospects are guaranteed. Augmenting on the similar position Patel and Svasand (2007), explains that, in terms of values, the orientation of MPs is above all to their constituents hence they are service responsive to their constituencies in a tangible sense rather than policy responsive in relation to the general needs of the nation as expressed by political parties and other social stakeholders. This therefore indicate that constituents political behavior and attitudes are primarily conditioned by tangible benefits in terms of development and social welfare services which fall among constituency related services.

4.3.3 Awareness of Improvised Constituency Office

With respect to respondents knowledge on whether they have ever seen, heard about or visited Improvised Constituency Office, majority expressed cognizance of the existence of the constituency office. They alluded to the fact that their MP has regular face to face encounters with constituents who need constituency related services either at his home, party based or neutral constituency office located within the constituency. It was however observed that majority of the respondents did not consider MPs home as an office. In line with this study, the MPs residences operate as office space so long it is used as a platform for rendering constituency related services. The respondents were dully enlightened on this position in reference to the perimeters of this academic work and dully cooperated.

Conversely, a substantial number of respondents indicated that they have no knowledge of the existence of the Improvised constituency offices within their constituency. This most probably implies lack of public awareness on the existence and functions of the office.

To this effect some academic suggests;

This could be a result of the informal nature of the platform considering the fact that it is not legally provided for as a result not resourced by government hence run at the convenience of the MP and generally patronized by those in dire need of its services or loyalists.

He further said the fact that it is not provided for there is little public awareness on its existence and functions hence low awareness and patronage levels.

The overall findings reveal that majority of the respondents expressed cognizance of the fact that their MP or his personal assistant meet with constituents seeking constituency related services through the platform of the Improvised constituency office located within the constituency.

4.3.4 Functions of the Constituency Offices.

With respect to the perceived functions of the Improvised Constituency Offices, the study shows that majority of the respondents are of the view that the office is a platform for political mobilization and its generally for holding political meetings. In regards to this, one respondent who is a party supporter said,

Usually, party grass root structures and supporters routinely meet at the party constituency office or MPs home every other two to three months alongside the MP, constituency chairman or MPs personal assistant to discuss the state of political and development affairs in the constituency. They sometimes meet to mobilize in preparation for a major political party or state event in the district or region.

In reference to this some CSO representative advanced,

The existing Improvised Constituency Offices are generally platforms for political mobilization and maintenance of patronage and that is why they are exclusive by designation in the sense that they are located at the MPs house or political party branded structures which are inconvenient platforms to majority constituents who are either apolitical or belong to other political parties.

Secondly, a number of respondents indicated that the platform is for registering constituency related problems such as infrastructure, food security, health and education services most of which are often provided for under Constituency Development Fund (CDF) among other interventions. Some respondents were of the view that the platform is for seeking and distribution of financial and material goods

to individual constituents facing one personal problem or another. On this assertion one MP said;

Being perceived generous by attempting to solve constituents personal problems within our capacity is one of the essential values of good leadership and it is a necessary character for maintenance of social and political capital. Welcoming and entertaining constituents through the parliamentary constituency office located at home or party structure implies serving them with food, material goods or some little money which goes along way putting across the impression that you are a good leader. When you do not welcome constituents at your home the contrary impression put across is that you are greedy and inhospitable hence you cannot make a good leader.

The least respondents indicated that the office is for making input on matters of national legislative or policy importance. The findings indicate that majority of the vertical functions at the platform of the parliamentary constituency offices are related to maintenance of political patronage. The general impression and attitude of the constituents on the functions of the parliamentary constituency office appears to be an interface platform between MPs and constituents especially with the emphasis on extraction of private goods. Majority of the respondents opine that democratic dividends include financial and material benefit from their representative.

4.3.5 Conclusion

The section has discussed pertinent study findings with reference to constituents knowledge on the existence and functions of the MP and Improvised Constituency Office. It has been largely established that majority of the respondents personally know their MP by name and background. It has further been revealed that besides formal duties and functions of the MP constituents expect their MP to perform vertical duties which is delivery of constituency related services which include many at times solving personal problems over and above everything else. Much as this is an informal function to a greater extent it improves MP- constituents relationship and determines the prospects of MP- constituents political contract. The section has largely responded to the second objective which was basically geared towards

establishing constituents knowledge levels on the existence and functions of the MP and the Improvised Constituency Offices.

4.4 Operations of the Improvised Constituency Office

This theme explores the scope of operations of the existing ICOs with respect to creating a conducive atmosphere that fosters constituents participation in the democratic governance process especially beyond elections. According to Akwetey and Mutangi (2022) and OHCHR (2018), some of the key indicators or enablers to effective democratic political participation are inclusiveness, accessibility, responsiveness, freedom of opinion and expression of the same, transparency and accountability among others. The hypothesis is that a constituency office should provide enabling platform for stimulation of the constituents non-electoral participation mechanisms such as discursive interfaces and a myriad of other engagement initiatives. In this context, the constituents might be able to advance their interests especially with regards to matters of constituency related services and national policy. The findings in this section therefore have been aligned to six main sub-themes in reference to the above captioned key enablers which are; accessibility, inclusiveness, responsiveness, freedom to opinion and expression of the same, transparency and accountability and overall effectiveness with regards to fostering constituents pro-active participation.

4.4.1 Degree of Accessibility

Accessibility in this respect entails constituents ability to physically or otherwise engage their representatives through the platform of the constituency office and voice out their interests without any obstructions in terms of access controls, geographical distance/ location, absence of the MP or staff or any other seclusion elements. According to Macleod (2006:3), "...among other political institutions, constituency offices stand alone as a kind of local infrastructure for encounter, recognition and engagement, connecting citizen to the representative and citizen to the state in between elections". The study has revealed that overwhelming majority of the respondents hold the opinion that in principle, a constituency office is one of the key

institutional framework that would easily facilitate constituents participation and therefore influence on the political arena.

With regards to the study findings, majority of the constituents expressed concern over physical and political barriers they encounter in attempt to exercise their right to participation in the governance process through the platform of the ICO. The findings indicate that the offices are not easily accessible in terms of proximity, location and mode of operation. Distance appear to impede majority from accessing constituency related services at the platform. To a greater extent distance factor limits the most physically vulnerable such as the aged from the potential to exercise their right to participation through direct engagement with the MP at the ICO. Further more, due to proximity challenges some party official bemoaned; "...the improvised office structures are usually located far off from majority constituents who would like their services all factors being equal. In terms of designation and proximity the offices are very exclusive and constituents right to participation is heftily compromised". This generally contradict recommendations by International Republican Institute IRI (2021:2), on location of the constituency offices which state, "...the constituency offices should be centrally located and easily accessible to as much of your constituents as possible while considering marginalized groups who may have in a more remote locations have reduced capacity to travel or face other barriers".

Secondly, by designation, the ICO is located at the residence of the MP or a private building which is usually branded by party colors located within the constituency. The residence of the MP is subject to personal protective security measures and privacy concerns meaning that most of the times access control mechanisms are usually activated because the MP cannot be personally familiar with every one of his/ her constituents. This limits the potential of every constituent to reach out and engage their MP on any pertinent personal or community problem. This therefore, puts off many constituents from proactively and freely engaging the MP at home as they would if the platform was neutrally located. Furthermore, due to dominance of politics of exclusion, party branded constituency offices are not publicly appealing or accommodating and therefore not easily accessible to people of diverse political affiliations or those apolitical. To this effect, IRI (2021, p. 19), asserts; "...even if it is your political party that provides the space for your constituency office, it is critical

that you take a non-partisan approach to constituent service and are equally accessible to all regardless of party affiliation”. This implies that accessibility is considered one of the critical enablers to effective civic participation in the democratic governance framework as it makes personal encounter feasible.

In the same regard a CSO leader argues,

An MP is elected by majority constituents and represent the overall interests of the whole constituency. The existing improvised constituency offices are sorely crafted for political mobilization and not necessarily to advance constituents objective participation in the governance framework. It is unfortunate we do not have a neutral platform for candid political interface and accountability between duty bearers and right holders accessible to all.

With regards to availability of the MP at the ICO, some traditional leader lamented,

Accessibility to the ICO implies availability of the MP at the office. We last engaged our MP at the constituency office located at his home in 2020 and ever since he is invincible, whenever there are meetings or invitations that require his attention he delegates a personal assistant or a party official to attend on his behalf as he is reportedly too busy with parliament business to pay attention to our problems.

This contradicts the recommendations by IRI (2021), which explicates that a constituency office should provide a consistent and visible point of entry for constituents to engage with their MPs and for the MPs to demonstrate their commitment to being accessible to the constituents. Mcmenamin (2021:2), further argues;

Making yourself and your staff regularly available to your constituents through a variety of in person mechanisms is essential...constituents should be able to easily submit their requests, comments, or questions and you should take steps to ensure all are fully able to do so regardless of disabilities or other barriers they may face.

This highlight the primacy of constituents access to both the platform of the constituency office and its related services.

Representative democracy is based on the principle of public trust of which openness and transparency are key currencies. It is therefore in the prime interest of the constituents that MPs and constituency related services are easily accessible and available. In attempt to bring representation close to the people and accord constituents an opportunity to influence public policy and constituency related interests, an officer in the office of the Clerk of Parliament alludes;

We have several interventions that aim to bring parliament closer to the people and bridge the existing representation gap between individual MPs and their constituents. Among other mechanisms we are engaging through radio and TV programs, public meetings and holding lectures in universities but they are far short in fostering interface between MPs and their constituents. As such, the provision for the constituency office would make accessibility and therefore democratic participation possible as they would become centers for civic education and information dissemination on legislative matters hence increasing proactive participation.

Corroborating these findings, a study carried out in Nigeria by Yinka et al (2019:80), found out that legislators are mostly assessed not by the numbers of bills sponsored but rather by the rate of access which the people have to them. This implies that the legislators who are more accessible by the people are likely to continue enjoying political legitimacy. This is premised on the fact that constituents-legislator relations enhance routine interactions, exchange of views and information to enable citizens express their preferences and provide support or opposition to decisions that affect their lives. This implies that constant engagement between the MP and the constituents through various avenues and mechanisms including the constituency office has the potential to foment political relationship between the MP and the constituents hence enhancing pro-active participation. Constituents would like representatives who are present and accessible to them. The presence of the MP through an appropriate forum such as constituency office would surely broaden constituents opportunity for democratic participation.

A substantial number of constituents indicated that traditionally these platforms have been dominated by partisan political party related activities putting out a public impression that they are political party affiliated and therefore exclusive especially to those deemed to be of other parties or apolitical. Some were of the view that the improvised offices lack standard operation procedures while a few bemoaned the absence of the formal legal provision as the reason to limited access. The general impression put across by the findings in this category indicate that the office is not as much effective in fostering constituents non-electoral participation due to accessibility hitches. Coleman (2005), argues that one of the factors that explain citizen disengagement from politics is because the representative system fails to forge meaningful connections between politicians and the people they represent to make them feel represented. The constituents feel not represented enough because of either lack or limited access to the Constituency Office therefore in turn stifling meaningful connection to their duty bearers.

4.4.2 Inclusiveness

According to Silver (2015), political inclusion is the capability of all citizens to participate in the making of collective decisions about matters that affect their lives. Akwetey and Mutangi (2022:12), further contend that;

...inclusive participation is not just about voter turnout and election but rather the processes associated with post-election behavior and those which lead to the next election cycle are also important, from elections to governance, law making, decentralization and the introduction of innovative mechanisms for sustaining participation and inclusion especially in the period between elections. Inclusion presupposes that every person, regardless of grounds such as origin, sex, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability ,group, culture, ethnic background, should have equal chance to participate or support the democratic processes.

This demonstrates that all factors being equal, one of the key principles of representative democracy is the possibility of every member of the political society to freely participate in making of decisions that directly affect their lives especially beyond elections.

The study findings indicate that due to the dominance of politics of exclusion based on the premise of party loyalty and affiliation majority of constituents who do not belong to the political party guild of the incumbent are generally automatically excluded from ICO related activities. Only a meagre 8% of the total respondents particularly loyalists or supporters of the representative appear to enjoy both constituency office related services and the audience with the MP. It was also revealed that majority of activities that take place at the ICO are highly political and partisan thereby rendering the ICO unappealing and in the process excluding majority constituents who are either politically non active or belong to a different political parties altogether. The overall impression created by these findings is that majority of the respondents have never engaged their MP via the ICO even though it is available and it is their ultimate interest constantly engage their representative on constituency related services. The main reason behind this scenario being high degree of politics of exclusion.

Complimenting on partisan and exclusionary politics a related study carried out in Nigeria by Udefuna et al. (2013), demonstrates that rather than being neutral, constituency offices where they exist are largely partisan and constituents engagement is generally based on political party or other forms of affiliation excluding the majority of the constituents from engaging with their representatives. This create a wide participation gap between the MP and majority constituents because the representative normally wins with a small margin in comparison to the total electorates in the constituency. Usually, those that are perceived to be opposition party members may only be given attention if they intend to join the MPs patronage otherwise they have nothing in common in as far as non-electoral participation is concerned. This generally foments divisive and exclusionary political atmosphere. The respondents were largely of the view that values of political inclusion with regards to the operations of the constituency office would automatically counter the politics of exclusion which is rampant in the Malawian political society. They asserted that political inclusion would foster social cohesion which is a prerequisite for a thriving democratic society. According to Verf (2021), inclusion creates more political legitimacy, decreases potential power imbalances between groups and creates more chances for non-active population groups.

However a parliamentarian objected that improvised constituency offices services are exclusive as she explains;

Being exclusive is suicidal to political career and it defeats the very logic of political survival in democracy. When I am in the constituency office I never rest a moment attending to long queues of constituents raising up both personal and public problems. We are never interested to know their political affiliation before we give them the attention they desire. This is because they are a potential vote and I am their political leader. A formal platform and staff would therefore be a relief as most of these issues would be professionally handled and civic education on our duties would be carried out.

4.4.3 Responsiveness

According to Murtin et al. (2018), by default democratic political representation entails political efficacy which is defined by office holders responsiveness to their constituents through accountability and participation mechanisms. Goetz and Gaventa (2001, p. 6), describe responsiveness as, “the extent to which public service agency demonstrates receptivity to the views, complaints, and suggestions of service users by implementing changes to its own structure, culture and service delivery patterns in order to deliver a more appropriate product”. That is the ability of the constituents to freely participate through input on both national policy and constituency related services and secure necessary feedback on time.

The study findings have revealed that there is a very wide participatory deficiency between the MPs and constituents due to lack of responsiveness to expectations and interests at the platform. The tenet of democratic representation is identified, characterized and measured by among others mutual exchange of information through effective communication mechanisms. Effective communication provide opportunity for learning and appreciation of necessary processes towards managing constituents interests and expectations as well as feedback. Majority respondents indicated that in the past year they have not had any or heard of an invitation for

interface opportunity with their MP at the ICO for mutual deliberation on constituency related interests. It was also affirmed that the platform has not been a point of contact and exchange of information pertaining to matters of both national and constituency service concern. According to IRI(2021),

...meaningful engagement demands simply more than broadcasting your message to constituents but rather you need to create a feedback loop in which your constituents are able to provide their input to you and in which you actively work to integrate and apply their input.

The study has further largely revealed that there has generally been very little feedback on requests or concerns raised by constituents through the constituency office. More also, most at times, several attempts by the constituents to reach out to their MP through the platform have proved futile because the offices neither have a fixed operation schedule nor open to the general public for business.

Augmenting further on this position, Macleod (2006, p. 2) asserts, "...constituency offices stand alone as a kind of local infrastructure for encounter, recognition and engagement connecting citizen to representative, and citizen to state during the days in between elections". This depicts a constituency office as a beehive for a responsive political relationship between MPs and their constituents beyond elections. In the absence of clear and open responsiveness mechanisms the ICOs fall short of their principle objectives. The respondents were largely of the opinion that with set standard operation procedures the constituency offices would provide effective conditions for a responsive engagement and mutual exchange of information and learning. The constituents would easily reach out and relay their interests and in the same context monitor feedback from duty bearers through the official platform unlike the ICOs which are highly personalized.

The study equally unveiled that the dominance of partisan political activities at the ICO has a negative psychological impact on members of other political parties who feel that they are not welcomed unless their own candidate takes over the seat. The impression put across by these findings demonstrate that there is very limited information and communication exchanges between the MP and constituents through the ICO. This implies absence of the opportunity for both parties to share a common

and mutual understanding on matters of constituency concern which is the very epitome of representative democracy.

The study further established that there is no or very little effort by the MPs, constituency office staff or party officials to raise public awareness on the existence and functions of the offices. This implies limited utilization of the facilities in addressing constituents interests hence stifling potential constituents proactive participation in the democratic governance loop. A report by the National Democratic Institute NDI (1995), recommending constituency office articulates;

A constituency office for each MP would serve a number of purposes. It would provide a central point of contact for constituents and their MP, the staff at the office would meet constituents and monitor activities when the MP is out of the constituency and the office would allow MPs to keep in contact with parliament, the government and their parties and to perform their day today duties in an efficient and professional manner.

4.4.4 Freedom to Opinion and Expression

Political representation in democratic governance is laden with core values such as respect for human rights and freedoms. Fundamental to these freedoms is the right to hold an opinion and expression of the same. According to OHCHR(2018), public participation in the governance process especially in democracy is a human right. As such governments should improvise deliberate institutional and legal frameworks that foster civic participation. According to guideline number 14 of the resolution, the exercise of the right to political participation requires an environment where all human rights in particular rights to equality and non-discrimination ,

The study findings largely indicate that majority of the constituents are of the view that they cannot be able to freely hold and express their diverse opinion at the platform of the ICO for a number of reasons. Only very few registered that they would be comfortable engaging and expressing their contrary opinion regarding constituency related services or national issues at the platform.

Majority of the respondents indicated that they would not be comfortable expressing their opinion at the ICO for various reasons including the platform operating like a personal entity, primary dominance of partisan political activities and loyalists as well as the perception that opposition interests may not be tolerated. It was revealed that an attempt to objectively contradict the status quo in terms of policy or constituency service delivery position may not be welcomed due to the nature of operating environment. Any board step in the critical direction may be considered offensive and countered with political threats or violence thereby compromising one's personal safety.

Other respondents indicated that the ICO is partisan and exclusive by location and its mode of operation. The fact that it is personal in the sense that it is run by the resources of the MP, sometimes branded in partisan party colors and dominated by party activities renders it exclusionary. A fewer respondents highlighted that the absence of a legal institutional framework renders the platform ineffective because there is no basis for obligation to act or respond in a certain manner. The assumption is that a formal legislative and institutional framework would create a legal operation framework, resource allocation and professionalism hence guaranteeing ultimate freedom to constituents participation.

Complimenting on the dominance of partisan and exclusionary politics, a research by Ezike (2022, p. 34), established that "...rather than being neutral, constituency offices where they exist are largely partisan and constituents engagement is generally based on political party or other forms of affiliation excluding the majority of the constituents from engaging with their representatives". This implies that an opposition member can only be given attention if he or she is intending to join the MPs patronage otherwise they have nothing in common in as far as non-electoral participation is concerned.

Among a number of key political resources that constituents have in a representative democracy is freedom to opinion and expression which are critical ingredients for effective non-electoral participation in the governance process. This can be exercised through a number of ways and amongst the most noble means is contact and dialogue. If the constituents cannot comfortably reach out in person and candidly express their disaffection over constituency related matter, then the very essence of democracy is at risk of compromise.

According to a respondent from the office of the Clerk of Parliament;

As parliament, we are cognizant of the fact that the improvised constituency offices mostly located in MPs homes or constituency party structures are not accommodative and effective platforms for promoting inclusive democratic participation. They are mostly used as centers for political mobilization than platforms for overall representation and articulation of constituents interests and daring to challenge the incumbents position on policy matter or constituency service issue surely threatens one safety.

This demonstrates that the social, physical and political restrictiveness of ICOs stifle the constituents ability to effectively participate in the democratic governance process. According to Coleman (2005), citizens want more of direct exchange and converse engagement with their representatives, want to be heard and understood by their politicians. The absence of a free and open political participation forum evidently limits constituents capacity to initiate participatory mechanisms upon their member of parliament.

According to Touchton et al (2017, p. 2);

...the understanding of the democratic citizenship stems from three complementary dimensions which are civil, political and social rights. Ensuring these rights is central to the democratic politics because citizens must have unpaired opportunities to formulate preference, engage individual and collective action and participate in deliberative processes.

This implies that opportunities to participate and formulate preferences in social and political spectrum where necessary are bound to deliberative mechanisms which cannot be feasible or fully realized without freedom to opinion and expression of the same.

Arguing in the same line a ward councilor said;

When I meet the MP at the ICO I have to be very cautious with whatever I say or suggest, most at times I flow with the position or proposition of the MP on constituency related issues or policy position. Any perception of open or objective engagement is not welcome as it is interpreted and considered to be a political threat. The case would be different if there was a formal constituency office which would surely conduct business professionally and accommodative to critical and diverse views.

Empirical evidence therefore suggests that the existing constituency offices are not as much open platforms feasible to fostering pro-active constituents participation in the democratic governance framework. The empirical research findings largely contradict the OHCHR (2018) recommendations on public political participation in the sense that by designation and mode of operation the Constituency Offices are not a conducive platforms where constituents may open up and express their opinion freely pertaining to constituency related services without risking their physical and social security. The findings reveal that almost absolute majority of the respondents engaged in this study agreed to the fact that the ICOs in their current state are not very convenient forums where constituents can easily reach out and objectively engage their MP. The participatory environment at ICO is deterrent to candid and objective engagement between the MP and the constituents.

4.4.5 Extent of Accountability

According to Touchton et al. (2017), representative government provide citizens with accountability mechanisms to encourage elected officials to enact inclusionary policies and programs. Furthermore, Hensen and Revinkilde (2013), assert that accountability is widely seen as a part of the ongoing process of democratization, a reaction to the governance gap and it is all about the effectiveness with which the governed can exercise influence over the governors. With respect to this study,

majority of the participants agreed that a constituency office should be one of the critical institutional framework that promote transparency and accountability in as far as public political participation business is concerned.

In reference to the study findings, most constituents are of the view that in their current state, constituency offices are not a convenient platform for exacting transparency and accountability between MPs and constituents. The respondents strongly indicated that it would be very hard for the constituents to initiate social accountability mechanisms for example on electoral campaign promises and constituency related services such as Constituency Development Fund (CDF). On this regard, according to Peruzzotti and Smulovitz (2006), social or diagonal accountability is a non-electoral yet vertical mechanism of control of political authorities that rests on the action of an array of citizens, associations and movements and relies on interested organized civil society to exert influence on the political system by employing both institutional and non-institutional means. Social accountability in this context is driven by the bottom up demand and that is constituents proactively claim their rights and entitlements through traditional accountability initiatives like demonstrations, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism and recent ones such as report cards and participatory public policy making among others, (Ahmed, 2008).

This is to a greater extent a citizen centered oversight mechanism for accountability as Chinsinga and Kayuni (2010), articulate that in a vibrant liberal democracy, there is a vibrant electorate that does not shy away from engaging itself in political issues such that it takes to task the elected representatives and hold them accountable for every decision made. However, in the absence of effective neutral and accessible institutional frameworks that create conducive platforms for exacting accountability such as formal constituency offices, active and effective participation remains a far-fetched aspiration. The provision for a formal Constituency Office might most probably be the right step towards fostering democratic participation and accountability which are some of the fundamental virtues in a representative democracy.

4.5 Legal Provision and Right to Participation

According to Dath (2021), political participation is relevant for any political system but it is indispensable feature of democracy. This study has established that the absence of the legal framework guiding the establishment and operationalization of the Constituency Office is one of the stumbling blocks to constituents right to effective participation in democratic governance. The assumption is that the presence of a legal framework would clear the way for resource provision and adoption of standard operation procedures guiding the running of the constituency offices thereby making it a more conducive and convenient platform for exercising democratic governance through constituents participation.

However, to this effect some academician argued;

The legal provision for the establishment and operationalization of the constituency office alone may not be enough intervention to compel demand for democratic political resources such as participation. The provision must be coupled with explicit guide lines that oblige the MP to work from the office or appear before the constituents at a certain interval in a financial year. This must be couple with clear and enforceable sanctions to ensure strict adherence to this noble duty.

In a related development the other academician further contended that;

It is not all about a matter of platform that encourages constituents participation. Matters of national policy are very complex in nature, highly technical and require intellectual prowess that enable personal skills such as self-control, higher order reasoning and effective communication. These qualities that are very scanty among majority constituents due to low literacy levels and lack of access to critical information. Much as these structures would be necessary in attempt to bring political government closer to the electorate and create a conducive atmosphere for constituents participation, there will be a need for much more interventions so that their relevance is felt.

Illuminating in the same line of thought, Chiweza (2021, p. 24), argues that, “countries may have legal and policy frameworks to promote participation in place but this may not guarantee that the principle of citizen participation may be followed”. To this effect, Akwetey and Mutangi (2022), suggest the need to promulgate or enact laws that promote affirmative actions and inclusivity so that its enforcement is justifiable. Majority of the constituents therefore are of the opinion that a legal and policy framework with robust enforcement mechanisms in place would compel MPs to appropriately service their constituencies and enable constituents to actively take part in democratic governance.

Augmenting further on the position, some MP said;

Indeed the formal provision of the Constituency Office is a critical step towards enhancing constituents participation and promoting a culture of political participation. However, the main problem is not necessarily the absence of the legal framework for constituency offices but rather the kind of politics we play. In politics we tend to promise too much and deliver very little because of the logic of political survival. The gist of the matter is rather the supply and availability of tangible benefits from the national resources such as CDF which render direct services such as scholarships, infrastructure, emergency interventions among others that matter the most. Even if the MP listened to the constituents every day at the constituency office in the absence of the delivery of tangible constituency related services they might conclude they are not properly represented.

This position implies that much as the legal requirement may be a critical step towards creating a favorable atmosphere for promoting constituents participation it may not be the ultimate remedy. The nature of politics and its ability to effectively respond to constituents interest and expectations maybe one of the fundamental factors.

4.6 Overall Effectiveness of Improvised Constituency Offices

Responding to the question on the relevance or effectiveness of the existing ICOs in advancing constituents non electoral participation, it was found that in principle almost absolute majority of the respondents agreed that the institution of the constituency office is but one of the fundamental institutional frameworks that should bring the tentacles of government to the citizenry. It was established that the ICO platforms are indeed one of the avenues through which some constituents and MPs use to engage with each other especially on constituency related services. These platforms somewhat foster a degree of constituents participation particularly among the MPs' loyal political patronage and those in dire need of personal financial or material support. They are generally centers for political mobilization but not really open for candid or objective engagement between the MP and constituents on matters of national policy or constituency service concern. In their current state of existence and operation they are not that effective platforms for pro-active political participation.

An overwhelming majority expressed dissatisfaction with both the designations and operations of the offices in regards to its potential to create a conducive atmosphere that promote the capacity of the constituents to effectively exercise non-electoral participation in the democratic process. It has been uncovered that most constituents have never personally engaged or been engaged by their representative at the ICO. They indicated reasons such as dominance of party activities that annex the office to partisan purposes, unavailability of the MP, lack of legal framework and standard operation procedures that may sanction the exercise of constituents political rights to participation among other factors. It was also further revealed that most constituents cannot openly or comfortably express their dissatisfaction with a constituency related service or the overall performance of the MP at the ICO. This entails that the constituents cannot be able to exercise their freedom to opinion in regards to their reservations towards the performance of their MP.

More also, an aggregate majority of the total respondents indicated that they could not be free to exact accountability upon their MP on a constituency related service such as CDF scholarship allocation citing absence of the legal framework, accessibility,

personal security, lack of standard operation procedures among others. One of the fundamental democratic value in a representative political society is the ability of the duty holder to account for their decisions and how they have exercised powers vested upon them. In this respect, if the constituents are not free to initiate and enforce accountability mechanisms then they are not in total control of their political resources. In reference to overall effectiveness in terms of fostering non electoral democratic participation the data shows that cumulatively more constituents are of the view that the ICOs in their current state are ineffective platforms and therefore impede constituents freedom to exercise their right to effective political participation. According to Kauma (2015) as in Ezike (2022), the operations of the constituency offices raise fundamental questions about the efficacy of government service delivery and that is, the extent to which such service delivery can be made accountable and how public participation in policy making can be made more meaningful. Majority constituents yearn for more participatory elements within the representative framework so that they at least have a say in the way they being represented. Unfortunately, the structure and operations of the ICOs do not inspire an appealing atmosphere. To this effect one constituent compliments;

Many of us would like to proactively participate but we do not know where and how to get involved because the existing Improvised Constituency Offices are never open to the general public, they are exclusionary and the MP himself is invincible within the constituency since winning elections.

However, some MP said that establishing formal constituency offices alone is not a clear cut solution to the question of constituents participation in democratic governance beyond elections. The MP argued that on the contrary, much as the formal offices may be an important political structure it may not be a silver bullet to the problem of constituents participation;

There is a risk of the existing structures thriving in the presence of the formal structures because of the dominance of informal political culture in terms of patronage and political capital maintenance. The informal duties that we perform in the informal structures like distributing material and financial resources which is outside our

mandate and conducting of partisan political party functions are very crucial for our political career prospects.

The findings have largely proven that the existence and operations of the ICOs do not effectively bridge the representation gap between the MPs and their constituents in terms of fostering democratic values such as participation. It demonstrates that despite the supply of the institutions by some MPs, by location and operations to a larger extent these offices do not foster proactive public political participation among constituents. This leaves constituents with electoral mechanisms alone as their ultimate political resource of influence which is not very relevant in influencing responsiveness to situations that require immediate attention of the political duty bearer MP in particular.

Institutional and New Institutional theories illuminate widely through out the findings of this study. According to Scott (2008), New Institutionalism theory concerns itself with informal conventions as well as formal rules and structures, they pay attention to the way in which institutions embody values and power relationships and the impact of institutions upon behavior and interactions between individuals and institutions. The theory argues that political behavior and the sources of political power derive primarily through informal relationship within and beyond the institutions of government. The data indicate that despite the informal nature of the ICOs, constituents acknowledge and appreciate the role of the platforms in promoting proactive political participation through engagement with their duty bearers. The findings indicate that ICOs provide effective intermediary platforms between the generation of demands in the constituency and the government itself through the MP. This strikes the balance between policy choices and political stability in the service of public interests by ensuring accessibility, responsiveness, accountability and other democratic virtues.

4.7 Review of the Constituency Office Diary Recordings

Below are some of the common reasons constituents visit the constituency offices as synthesized from the study areas constituency offices:

- i. To greet the MP
- ii. To submit invitation for a social, cultural and religious events e.g. chiefs coronation, weddings, fundraising activities
- iii. To express concern on community infrastructure development interest e.g. bridge, eminent hunger, health issues
- iv. Political mobilization and patronage maintenance meetings
- v. Looking for secondary school bursary from Constituency Development Fund (CDF)
- vi. Seeking financial and material support for funeral and sicknesses
- vii. Looking for information on application of public services e.g. NEEF loans
- viii. Soliciting sponsorship for sporting activities such as football and netball bonanzas
- ix. To contribute or comment on national policy issues pertaining to food security, public health among others.

A total of approximately 38 recordings were made in each constituency diary per month. Visitors were encouraged to leave a mobile phone number for further follow up when necessary. The offices do not have fixed operation schedule or standard operation procedures. In the absence of the MP they are normally manned by MPs personal assistants or secretaries. There were draft recordings of MPs responses and follow ups to some complaints lodged at the constituency offices. To a greater extent, the recordings indicate that indeed the improvised constituency offices facilitate MP-constituents engagement. However their informal nature and operations render them ineffective platforms for facilitating overall constituents proactive participation in the democratic governance exercise.

4.8 Conclusion

The section has delved into the relevance of the operations of the ICOs with regards to providing an enabling atmosphere that can foster constituents active participation in the governance process and overall political relationship with the MP. The effectiveness has been measured by factors such as constituents access to the services, responsiveness to constituents interests and expectations, inclusiveness; that is the potential to accommodate every constituent inconsiderate of social, economic and

political differences and degree of accountability. It has also explored aspects such as freedom to opinion and expression of the same, legal provision and public participation and overall operational effectiveness of with regards to promoting constituents non- electoral political participation culture. The section has widely responded to the third objective which was examining the operations of constituency offices in respect to fostering constituents participation in the democratic governance.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The core purpose of the study was to analyse the relevance of the Improved Constituency Offices as a platform for constituents participation in the democratic governance process especially beyond elections. The study has realized this goal by using qualitative method to assess the relevance of the operations of the Improved Constituency Offices with regards to creating a conducive atmosphere that fosters constituents non-electoral participation in the governance process at constituency level.

In the first place, the study analyzed various mechanisms and avenues constituents use in their attempt to engage their representatives on matters of both constituency and national policy concern. Secondly, the study assessed respondents knowledge or awareness levels on the existence and functions of both the MP and the Improved Constituency Offices. Lastly, the study attempted to examine the operations of the Improved Constituency Offices with regards to their potential to create a persuasive atmosphere necessary for every member of the political constituency to pro-actively participate in the political governance through continuous engagement with their MPs. Some of the measurable participation enablers assessed in this study were; access to the constituency offices, responsiveness to constituents' interests, extent of accountability, inclusiveness, freedom to opinion and expression of the same.

Informed by the New Institutional theory the findings largely reveal that indeed institutions in their formal or informal state have the capacity to shape human political behavior and attitudes.

The existence of informal structures such as the Improvised Constituency Offices have created a partial opportunity for the constituents to participate in the governance process. However, formalization of these institutions has the potential to broaden the participation space and drastically reduce the democratic representation gap between MPs and their constituents.

The empirical study findings at hand add new knowledge in the academia particularly to do with understanding the scope of power relations dynamics between duty bearers MPs in this context and their constituents. The findings have particularly explicated the relevance of the improvised constituency offices as platforms for constituents proactive political participation in the democratic governance dispensation and consolidation. Furthermore, the findings are essential to inform relevant stakeholders on the existing democratic participation gaps between constituents and their MPs due to the absence of relevant institutional frameworks that provide a platform for critical and objective interface between constituents and their MPs. Taking deliberate steps to address this democratic deficit especially from bottom-up approach has the potential to contribute to the Malawi's democracy consolidation drive. Kayola (2016), assert that active citizenship cannot exist in a vacuum, it needs clear and accessible structures to enhance it. The study findings have largely discovered that much as the Improvised Constituency Offices act as engagement platforms between the MPs and their constituents; absence of the legal and institutional framework and therefore resource provision for formal constituency offices in Malawi is one of the main contributing factors to democratic deficit particularly between MPs and their constituents.

To this effect Coleman (2005, p. 5), explicitly postulates;

...democracy works best when voters and their representatives connect: exchanging views, accounting for themselves to each other and ideally sharing a common world view....The public does not expect politicians simply to do what they are told nor do politicians want or expect a public that is simply acquiescent in the face of its electoral representatives higher status or greater knowledge. Whatever they might want on any single issue, what the people feel they deserve

from their representatives is to be listened to, to be understood and to be treated with respect.

In this regard, the institution of the constituency office among other platforms provides the forum for constituents to be able to have an influential say in the way they are being represented in the democratic political governance society.

5.2 Further Studies

The study has largely uncovered that constituents acknowledge a clear representation gap in their governance participation effort especially engaging with their MP at the ICO due to a myriad of challenges. This compromise their participation and influence in democratic governance especially in between elections as they appear to lose their political resources. It has been revealed that majority constituents reach out to ICOs not necessarily to provide critical policy input on matters of national concern or express constituency interests or expectations, but rather to solicit personal financial and material support. This is generally as a result of abject poverty, high illiteracy levels and the kind of dominant politics in our society which tend to promise too much and build unrealistic expectations among desperate constituents. This has bred an entrenched culture of political corruption and risk compromising the very essence of democracy. The scenario raises probing questions on whether with higher levels of poverty and illiteracy majority constituents would be able to provide quality input on matters of national and constituency concern. It is therefore imperative that further studies consider to look into the interplay between high levels of poverty and illiteracy and quality of participation in democratic governance.

5.3 Policy Level

As a way of making recommendations at policy level, the study offers the following suggestions: The need to review and improve the operations of the existing ICOs by ensuring that such platforms are apolitical, accessible to all, responsive, inclusive and accountable to the constituents. Secondly, Parliamentary Constituency Offices should be legally established in order to broaden the participation spectrum.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Question Guide for Office of the Clerk of Parliament.

1.0 Demographic data

1. Name of respondent:

2. Institution:

3. Designation:

4. Sex: Male [] Female: []

5. Age range: 18-35 [] 36-50 [] 51---[]

6. Highest education level attained: 1. Primary [] 2. Secondary [] 3. College []

4. University [] 5. Post graduate []

2.0 Mechanisms Constituents Use in Attempt to Engage their MPs

1. What are some of the mechanisms and avenues constituents use in attempt to engage their MPs?

.....
.....
.....

2. In your opinion how effective are these mechanisms? (a) Very effective (b) Effective (c) Not effective (d) Very ineffective.....

(3.0) Awareness on Existence and Functions of the Improvised Constituency Offices

3. Do individual MPs have an office anywhere within the government structure?.....

.
.....
.....

4. If not how and where do you expect them to engage their constituents and deal with case work?.....

.....
.....
.....
.....

5. Is the office of the speaker and clerk of parliament aware of the existence of Improvised Constituency Offices?

.....

6. If yes on the above question, how relevant are these constituency offices in fostering representation and constituents participation in democratic governance?.....

.....
.

(4.0) Operations of the Improvised Constituency Offices

7. To the best of your knowledge how easily accessible are the ICOs to the general constituents?.....

.....

8. How inclusive are the ICOs to constituents from diverse political background?.....

.....

9. Do you think constituents can freely express their opinion at the ICO?.....

.....

.....

10. Do you think the absence of the formal constituency offices in a way deny constituents the right to effective representation and participation in democratic governance?.....

.....11. Do individual parliamentarians have office space within parliament premises or district councils? Yes [] No []

12. If not have there been any past attempts for such provision? Yes [] No []

13. Are there any prospects for the establishment of a parliamentary constituency offices in the foreseeable future? Yes [] No [] Not really []

Any Recommendations or Comments
.....

.....

Appendix 2: Question Guide for Members of Parliament.

1.0 Demographic data

1.Name of respondent:

2.Institution:

3.Designation:

4.Sex: Male [] Female: []

5.Age range: 18-35 [] 36-50 [] 51---[]

6.Highest education level attained:1. Primary [] 2. Secondary [] 3.College []

4.University [] 5.Post graduate []

2.0 Mechanisms used by constituents to Engage their MPs

1. How often do you engage your constituents in a year?.....

.....
.....
.....
2. Apart from personal presence at the constituency office how else do you maintain engagement with the constituents.
.....
.....

3.0 Awareness and knowledge levels on existence and functions of constituency offices

3. Are your constituents aware of the existence of this constituency office?.....
.....
.....

4. What are some of the regular functions performed at the constituency office?.....
.....
.....
.....

5. Is the constituency office in its current state the first point of contact between you and the constituents?.....
.....
.....

4.0 Operations of the constituency office

6. Is there any fixed standard operation procedure of the constituency office?.....
.....
.....
.....

7. Is the office the first point of contact and access to information on matters of constituency and policy concern?.....

8. Do you provide feedback to constituents interests and requests through the office?.....
.....
.....
.....

9. How easily accessible is the constituency office and its related services?.....
.....
.....

10. How inclusive is the ICO to constituents of diverse political affiliations?.....
.....
.....
.....

11. Do you think constituents with diverse views and opinions different from your own can easily reach out and engage you on matters of both constituency and national policy concern?.....

12. To the best of your knowledge is the absence of the formal provision for constituency offices an impediment to constituents right to effective participation in democratic governance?
.....

Recommendations/ Comments

.....
.....
.....

Appendix 3: Question Guide for Focus Study Groups.

1.0 Demographic data

1.Name of respondent:

2.Institution:

3.Designation:

4.Sex: Male [] Female: []

5.Age range: 18-35 [] 36-50 [] 51---[]

6.Highest education level attained:1. Primary [] 2. Secondary [] 3.College [] 4.University [] 5.Post graduate []

7.What do you do for a living?.....

8. Political inclination/ membership 1. MCP 2.DPP 3. UTM 4. UDF 5. Other.....

2.0 Awareness/ Knowledge Levels on the existence and functions of MPs and Improvised Constituency Offices.

9.Do you know your MP? Yes [] No [] Can't say []'

10.Do you know the roles of your member of parliament Yes [] No []'

11. If your answer to the above question is yes mention at least one role of an MP
.....
.....

12. Have you ever met or engaged your MP on any topical issue? Yes [] No []

13. If yes to the question above where or how did you meet your MP? MPs home ☐ Social occasion ☐ Political rally ☐ Constituency office ☐ Social media ☐ Phone call
14. Have you ever heard of a constituency office before? Yes ☐ No ☐ Cant say ☐
15. Does your MP have a constituency office? Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know ☐
16. Have you ever visited a constituency office before? Yes ☐ No ☐
17. If yes was the MP responsive to your queries? Yes ☐ No ☐
18. Would you visit a constituency office to engage your MP on any community problem or issue? Yes. ☐ No. ☐

2.0 Operations of the Improvised constituency Office

20. Would you visit a constituency office to engage your MP on community problem? Yes ☐ No ☐ Cant say ☐
21. In not on the question above why?.....
.....
.....
22. According to your experience are the current Improvised constituency Offices accessible to all constituents?.....
23. If not on the above question why?
.....
...
24. Have you ever received feedback or information pertaining to constituency related services or policy issues through ICO?
25. Would you comfortably either individually or collectively engage your MP on matters of accountability such as electoral promises at the ICO?
26. Do you think the operations of the ICOs are inclusive to constituents from diverse social and political affiliations?
27. Can you be able to freely express your opinion at the ICO even that which contradict the MPs position?
28. The absence of a provision for a parliamentary constituency office deny electorates effective democratic representation. Agree strongly ☐ Agree ☐ Don't agree ☐ Don't know
12. In your opinion please rank in your order of importance the factor that you think is affecting vertical accountability through constituency office.

S/N	Factor	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Lack of professional staff					
2	Lack of standard operation procedure					
	Absenteeism of staff					
	Inaccessibility of constituency office staff					
	Lack of constitutional backing for the existence of the office					
	Non responsiveness of the office to the demands of the constituents					
	Inability to access the elected representative					

Appendix 4: Question Guide for and CSO representatives.

1.0 Demographic data

1. Name of respondent:

2. Institution:

3. Designation:

4. Sex: Male [] Female: []

5. Age range: 18-35 [] 36-50 [] 51---[]

6. Highest education level attained: 1. Primary [] 2. Secondary [] 3. College []

4. University [] 5. Post graduate []

2.0 Awareness/ Knowledge Levels on Existence and Functions of Constituency Offices

1. Do you run any projects that promote democracy consolidation in Malawi? a.

Yes.....

b. No.....

2. Do such programs promote effective democratic representation and civic participation in governance?

a. Yes b. No.....

3. Have you ever heard of the Improvised Constituency Office? A. Yes B. No

4. What do you think are the functions of the Improvised Constituency Offices.....
.....

2.0 Operations of the Improvised Constituency Office

7. Do you think the public is aware enough of the existence and functions of the Improvised Constituency Offices?.....

8. In your opinion, is the constituency office in its current status an accommodative platform for exacting accountability?

.....
.....

9. If not on the question above, why?

10. Can a constituent freely express his or her opinion at the Improvised Constituency Office?

11. By its design and operations do you think the Improvised Constituency Office inclusive to all constituents inconsiderate of political and social inclinations?

12. The absence of a provision for a parliamentary constituency office deny electorates effective democratic representation. Agree strongly [] Agree [] Don't agree [] Don't know