

**Assessing the Quality of Parliamentary Representation in Ghana**

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**Abstract**

*It is a truism that the practice of democracy in its classical form as occurred in ancient Athenian Greek is no longer possible in the modern state. Selecting leaders to represent the interests of the citizenry, particularly in the legislative arm of government is a crucial replacement of the Athenian-styled democracy. However, the quality of representation in many African democracies, including Ghana, is poor as legislators are unable to act in a manner that promotes the interests of their constituents. Indeed, findings of this study points to the fact that even though parliamentarians in Ghana visit their constituents regularly, there is no deliberate effort to dialogue and interact with their constituents on matters directly affecting them. The study concludes that the quality of representation in Ghana is undermined as there is inadequate connection between the interests of constituents and the decisions taken on their behalf by their legislators.*

**Keywords:** Parliament, Quality, Representation, Interest, Constituents

**Introduction**

The foremost function of every Parliament all over the world is representation. In the classical form of democracy as practiced in ancient Athenian Greek, ordinary people practiced direct and unmediated role in the governance of the polis or the small city-states. However, with the astronomical growth in size of populations and the complexities involved in the art and science of modern governance, the Athenian-style of direct governance system has given way to a kind of arrangement where the ordinary people select their leaders to Parliament and task the elected to govern on their behalf. This is the origin and the essence of the modern day representative democracy.

It has been argued that Ghana has made significant strides towards democratic consolidation after successfully holding seven General Elections since 1992 and undergoing political transfer of power for three consecutive times (Ayee, 2016;

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Gyampo and Graham, 2017). Does the Ghanaian situation necessarily epitomize democratic consolidation? The response to this cannot be straight-forward as there remain several challenges that undermine the nation's drive towards democratic consolidation, including lack of effective representation of the people.

The literature on democratic consolidation is mainly between two schools of thought; the minimalists and the maximalists' perspectives (Gyampo and Graham, 2017). Minimalists such as Linz (1990) argue that democracy is consolidated when there is the 'two-elections' test or the 'transfer of power' test. This occurs when a government that had been elected in free and fair elections, contests and is defeated at subsequent elections and accepts the results. In this view, it is not about winning office but losing it and accepting the verdict (Linz, 1990). This demonstrates that influential players and their social backers are ready and have respect for the rules of the game over the continuation of their power (ibid). The two elections or transfer of power test, according to Beetham (1994), is problematic since it is possible to have an electoral system that meets certain minimum democratic standards, but where such a transfer of power may simply not take place, because the electorate may keep voting for the same party as occurred in Botswana since independence, Japan and Italy for over fifty years (Beetham, 1994: 130). In this regard, some scholars including Beetham (1994) and Diamond (1999) have argued that a democracy could be described as consolidated when there is simply longevity or generation test of twenty years of regular competitive elections. But this position has also been challenged on grounds that it could also lead to a long term serving party, with no change in government, and no experience in power transfer (Beetham, 1994). However, the minimalist scholars have been criticized as committing the fallacy of electoralism, a practice of extolling the ideals of elections and overly hyping their successful conduct over all other dimensions of democratic consolidation (Karl, 2000).

Maximalists like Beetham (1994) and Diamond (1999), on the other hand, suggest that for a democracy to be consolidated, there must be certain conditions in place beyond elections and the turnover of power. The conditions, *inter alia*, include the quality of representation of the people by their elected leaders on important decision making platforms like the legislature (Diamond, 1999; Beetham, 1994; Linz and Stepan, 1996).

The maximalist view of democratic consolidation appears to lift high the

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standards required for a country to attain the level of democratic maturity. It must however be noted that the two views are not mutually exclusive. Fledgling democracies must attempt to satisfy the requirements of both schools of thought, progressing from the minimalist view to the maximalist position.

In determining the extent of democratic consolidation in Ghana, this paper reviews the quality of parliamentary representation in Ghana. It interrogates the concept of representation and addresses the question regarding how effective Parliamentarians have been in seeking to represent and champion the interest of their constituents. Data from the 2016 Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA-Ghana) Survey on Public Perception of Members of Parliament (PPMPs) would be analyzed in determining the quality of representation in Ghana.<sup>1</sup>

**Conceptual Nomenclature**

The conceptual nomenclature that underpins this paper is representation. It essentially denotes trusteeship and connotes acting in the best interest of those being represented, in a manner responsive to them (Pitkin, 1967; Heywood, 2002). It is democratic and meaningful, provided that it links trustees and their constituents in such a way that the latter's views are articulated and interests secured in all decision making activities undertaken by the former (Heywood, 2002: 224). As trustees, representatives must act independently and his or her action must involve discretion; enlightened conscience; mature judgment; and not necessarily consulting those who are being represented who may be less fortunate in terms of education, expertise, experience and understanding (Pitkin, 1967; Heywood, 2002). Indeed Pitkin (1967) postulates that where representation is conceived as being "unattached abstraction", that is, an interest to which no particular persons are so specially related, the consultation of anyone's wishes and opinions is least likely to seem significant. She notes further that those who are being represented must also be capable of independent action and judgment, particularly on matters of direct concern to them. This is what Pitkin (1967) refers to as substantive representation. She argues that the more a representative is seen as a member of superior elite of wisdom and reason, the less it makes sense for him to be required to always consult the opinions of the represented.

However, if the constituents are able to match their representatives in terms of wisdom and knowledge on any particular issue, then the constituents must be consulted (ibid). In other words, Pitkin (1967) argues that constituents must be consulted in deciding on matters that they have better knowledge about and on

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matters that directly affect them. This is because no representative can claim mastery and understanding of the plight and challenges of their constituents better than the people themselves (Heard, 2006). In the view of Ball Hague and Harrop (2001), consulting constituents may take the form of regular visits and interactions with the grassroots through platforms such as Town Hall Meetings and other informal interactive sessions in the office of the representative or at any agreed venue. The frequency or regularity of interactions may be determined and agreed by both the constituents and representative (Ball and Peters, 2005; Heard, 2006).

For Andrew Heywood (2002), representatives must operate like trustees who are required to hold and exercise power on behalf of their constituents. This is based on the belief that knowledge and understanding are unequally distributed in society in the sense that not all citizens know what is best for them (Ball and Peters, 2005). This view, however, has strong elitist implications, since it stresses that once selected, representatives should exercise independent judgment on the grounds that the mass of people do not know their own best interests (Hague and Harrop, 2001). Again, it appears to have clear anti-democratic implications, because “if politicians for instance should think for themselves because the public is ignorant, poorly educated or deluded, then surely it is a mistake to allow the public to elect their representatives in the first place” (Heywood, 2002: 225). Moreover, the link between representation and education is questionable. Whereas education may certainly be of value in aiding the understanding of intricate political and economic problems, it is far less clear that it breeds altruism, gives a broader sense of social responsibility and helps representatives to make correct moral judgment about the interest of others (Ball and Peters, 2005). Furthermore, there is the danger that if representatives are allowed to exercise their own judgment, they will simply use the latitude to pursue their own selfish interests. In this way, representation could simply become a substitute for democracy (Heywood, 2002: 226).

It is to surmount the challenges of representation as articulated above and improve its quality that Hanna Pitkin (1967:109) argued that if a representative and his or her constituents are relatively equal in wisdom and in capacity, he or she would be required to consult his or her constituents. This essentially ensures that the interest of constituents, particularly on matters directly affecting them are guaranteed in decisions taken by representatives (Hague and Harrop, 2001; Pitkin, 1967).

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Heywood (2002: 227) has described representatives who must consult their constituents before deciding on their behalf as delegates. A delegate acts for others on the basis of clear guidance or instructions (Heard, 2006). In other words, a delegate is expected to act as a conduit conveying the views of others, while having little or no capacity to exercise his or her own judgment or preferences. As argued by Pitkin (1967), this is because the delegate is not superior to his constituent in terms of wisdom and capacity. A delegate in the view of Pitkin (1967), simply mirrors the interest of his or her constituent and the more people identify and get attached to their interests, the more likely representatives would be required to consult them and act in response to what they require. According to Heywood (2002: 228), those who favour the delegate model of representation usually support mechanisms that ensure that representatives are bound as closely as possible to the views of the represented. The virtue of this model of representation is that it provides broader opportunities for popular participation and serves to check the likely self-serving inclinations of representatives.

This model, however, requires extensive consultations with constituents before decisions are taken thereby slowing down decision-making and limiting the scope for leadership and statesmanship (Hague and Harrop, 2001; Heard, 2006). Indeed, representatives are forced to reflect the views of their constituents or even pander to them, and are thus not able to mobilize the people by providing vision and inspiration (Heard, 2006).

Heywood (2002: 230) identified two other models of representation: mandate and resemblance models. Mandate is based on the idea that in winning an election, a representative gains popular mandate that authorizes him or her to carry out whatever programmes he outlined during the electioneering campaign. A representative in this regard, has the mandate to pursue only what he promised to pursue prior to his or her selection. This model, keeps representatives to their promises (Ball and Peters, 2005). It however, imposes a straitjacket by limiting the actions of representatives only to those proposals they made prior to their election, leaving no scope for them to adjust policies in the light of changing circumstances (Hague and Harrop, 2001). On the other hand, the resemblance model is based less on the manner in which representatives are selected than on whether they typify or resemble the group they claim to represent. A representative constitutes a microcosm of the larger society, containing members drawn from all groups and sections in society and in numbers that are proportional to the size of the groups in society at large

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(Heywood, 2002: 232). The resemblance model suggests that only people who come from a particular group, and have shared the experiences of that group, can fully identify with its interests. This model, according to Heywood (2002), represents the difference between “putting oneself in the shoes of another” and having direct and personal experience of what other people go through. He argues that a pro-feminist male may, for instance, sympathize with women’s interests and support the principle of sexual equality, but will never take women’s problems, as seriously as women may do themselves, because they are not his problems.

The idea that representatives should resemble the represented undoubtedly causes a number of difficulties. One of these is that the model portrays representation in exclusive or narrow terms, believing that only a woman can represent women, only a black person can represent other black people, only a member of the working class can represent the working classes, and so on (Ball and Peters, 2005). The deficiency in this reasoning is that a representative who typifies the characteristics of a group may not always serve the interest of that larger group (ibid). Again, if all representatives simply advanced the interests of the groups from which they come, the result would be social division and conflict, with no one being able to defend the common good or advance a broader public interest (Heywood, 2002: 234). In the view of Heywood (2002) therefore representation may be achieved through the exercise of wisdom by educated elites, through guidance and instructions given to a delegate, through the winning of a popular mandate, or through representatives being drawn from the group they represent. He notes however that it is common to find more than one principle of representation operating at the same time within a system, suggesting that no single model is sufficient in itself to secure adequate representation.

Heywood (2002), Heard (2006) and Pitkin (1967) believe that a government is seen as representative not by demonstrating its control over its subjects but just the reverse, by demonstrating that its subjects have some control over what it does. Every action of the government is attributed to the citizen formally and legally. In representative government, this attribution has substantive content: the people really do act through their government and are not merely passive recipients of its actions. In this regard, leaders must not merely be in control, not merely promote the public good but must also be responsive to the people (Pitkin, 1967: 120).

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The development and improvement of representative institutions, the cultivation of persons capable of looking after the interests of others in a responsive manner are crucial if the fine vision that constitutes the idea of representation is to have any effect (Heard, 2006; Pitkin, 1967). At the same time, “we must not allow institutions, habits and conducts as well as the behavior of representatives to become our standard and ideal. This is because whether what we designate as representation in the world really is, will always depend on the way its structure and functioning work out in practice” (Pitkin, 1967: 122). Men have always striven for institutions that will really produce what the ideal requires; and institutions or individuals claiming to be representative have always been vulnerable to the charge that they do not really represent. Representative government is thus ideally the best form of government for the very reason that it will not actually be representative in its character unless it is conditioned. By its essential nature, it is a system of trusteeship. According to Pitkin (1967), institutions claiming to be representative can justify their character as such only to the extent that they establish and maintain such trusteeship.

Basically, Pitkin (1967); Heywood (2002); Ball and Peters (2005); Hague and Harrop (2001); and Heard (2006) all agree that a representative must act in the best interest of the group that he or she represents. The people, where necessary, must be able to exercise some control over the decision making process and their representatives. They must have the power to remove leaders who fail to advance and protect the fiduciary trust reposed in them. More importantly, constituents must be consulted at all times by representatives on matters that directly affect them. The consultations may take the form of regular or periodic interactions between the representatives and constituents at the constituencies. This is because no representative could claim to have more wisdom and experience on matters directly affecting constituents more than the constituents themselves.

The usefulness of the conceptual discussion on representation cannot be underestimated in the sense that it provides the framework within which the parliamentary representation of constituents could be analyzed. As trustees, Parliamentarians could act on behalf of their constituents without consulting them. It must however be noted that Parliamentarians represent constituencies and members of constituencies reside more in the area than their parliamentary representatives. In this regard, they can match their representative in terms of wisdom and experience on matters affecting the area. Indeed, they may have

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even more superior wisdom and knowledge on matters affecting the constituency more than the Member of Parliament. Therefore, per the exposition of Hanna Pitkin, such representatives ought to be consulted by the representatives periodically before deciding on their behalf as delegates. The question however, is: to what extent does this happen in Ghana? The next section of this paper reviews and analyzes the 2016 Survey findings on Popular Perceptions of Parliamentarians conducted by the IEA-Ghana in this area.

#### **The 2016 Survey: Key Questions on Parliamentary Representation in Ghana *Knowledge of Member of Parliament***

The 2016 IEA survey sought to find out whether the electorate know and interact with their MPs. In this regard, the question “Do you know your Member of Parliament?” was asked. The results of the survey show that out of the 1496 respondents who answered the questions posed to them, almost a quarter (23.1%) did not know their MPs. The highest proportion of respondents (37.3%) who did not know their MPs came from the Greater Accra Region. This was followed by Ashanti (30.5%), Brong Ahafo (29.1%), and Central (28.3%) regions. On the contrary, about nine out of ten of every respondent in the Upper East knew his or her MP. Table 1 below shows the picture:

**Table 1: % of Constituents who know their MP by Region**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Number</b>
Western	79.3	20.7	100.0	135
Central	71.7	28.3	100.0	120
Greater Accra	62.7	37.3	100.0	225
Volta	86.7	13.3	100.0	120
Eastern	88.7	11.3	100.0	150
Ashanti	69.5	30.5	100.0	269
Brong Ahafo	70.9	29.1	100.0	134
Northern	87.4	12.6	100.0	135
Upper East	90.3	9.7	100.0	103
Upper West	82.9	17.1	100.0	105
<b>Total</b>	<b>76.9</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1496</b>

Knowing one’s representative is crucial in achieving effective representation. With little or no knowledge or information about representatives, accountability cannot be demanded by the citizenry or voting populace from their elected



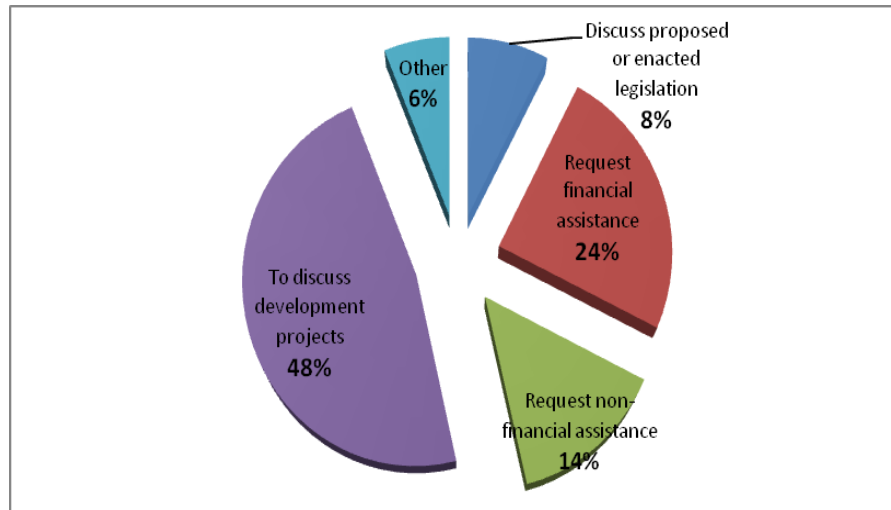
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representatives. The demand for accountability on the part of constituents is critical in deepening the quality of representation in any democracy in the world (Lindberg, 2010).

***Contact and Interaction with Constituents***

Per the principles of representation, contact and constant interactions of MPs with their constituents is necessary as it serves as one sure way the MPs can get to know the concerns and opinions of their constituents on important national issues. More importantly, it is the potent mechanism for ensuring that constituents who wield superior knowledge on matters affecting the constituencies bring their perspectives to bear on decisions that directly affect them as postulated by Pitkin (1967). In the IEA survey, respondents were asked whether MPs contact or interact with them to discuss matters affecting the constituencies. On the whole, the results show that eight out of ten respondents or 80% of the respondents had never been contacted by their MPs. Only 20% of the respondents indicated that they had interacted with their MPs to discuss matters relating to laws to be enacted, development projects in their constituencies, financial assistance and non-financial support. Indeed, almost half (47.4 %) of the respondents who contacted or had been contacted by their MPs discussed development projects in their constituencies. For 7.8% of respondents their interactions with their MPs were devoted to the discussion of proposed or enacted policies and legislations. About 24.4% of the respondents made use of the interactive session to seek financial assistance from their MPs contacted their MP while about 14% did so to seek non-financial assistance. Figure 1 shows the picture:

**Figure 1: Reasons why Constituents Contacted their MP (%)**



The significant role of ‘development projects’ as a key factor for interaction between MPs and their constituent may be due to the desire to tackle the challenges of rural poverty and the need for the campaign promises made by the MPs during elections to be fulfilled (Ayee, 2016; Bob-Milliar, 2012). If such interactive sessions could focus more on the development of constituencies, then such interactive sessions must occur among the cross section of constituent in order to give meaning to representation.

Although democracy essentially means government by the people, it is practically impossible for everyone to directly take part in the process of governance. Therefore the election of representatives to take decisions on the behalf of the people is a key feature of a democratic system. However, as may be deduced from the conceptual formulation of Pitkin (1967), no representative can claim to understand issues directly affecting constituents better than the constituents themselves. In this regard, on matters that constituents have more knowledge and information, representatives must endeavour to seek the views of the former. In order to effectively champion the course of their constituents, it is expected that the Members of Parliament (MPs) interact constantly with their constituents to find out their needs and opinions on issues of national

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importance. This engagement enables MPs to take decisions reflective of the views of their constituents.

Unfortunately, evidence from the IEA 2016 survey show that a preponderant majority of constituents are not consulted by their MPs even though the MPs are expected to act in a manner responsive to the interests of the constituents. The activities and work of many parliamentarians as well as the questions they pose on many issues reflect partisan concerns which have little bearing on the plight that afflict the constituents whose interests are expected to be articulated and championed (Ninsin, 2016; Ayee, 2016).<sup>2</sup> These cast a slur on representation in Ghana. As indicated earlier, the primary function of an MP is representation. However, representation cannot connote trusteeship at all times, particularly when decisions to be taken directly affect constituents. In his deliberations on general national issues, an MP must act as a trustee. However, on matters directly affecting the constituents, an MP must consult the former to be sure that the latter's actions are responsive to the needs of the constituents. In other words, MPs must act as delegates who directly mirror the views and concerns of their constituents on matters concerning constituency development. The quality and extent of interaction between the MPs and their constituents determines how representative an MP is to the interest of his constituents. Unfortunately, per the survey results, regular interactions do not take place between the MPs and a preponderant majority of the citizenry in the constituencies.

Many MPs may avoid the opportunity to interact with their constituents and hence undermine the principles of representation for several reasons. Anecdotal evidence and indeed, findings of some studies show that some actually attend public events such as festivals and funerals and sneak out surreptitiously to Accra to avoid financial and other demands from constituents (Frempong, 2015; Lindberg, 2010).

The study shows that some of the key issues, (apart from discussing development projects and legislations) that crop up during the interactive sessions between MPs and their constituents are financial and non-financial demands. Some constituents go to their MPs with all sorts of demands including school fees, bride price, hospital expenses, utility bills, moneys for funerals, out-dooring, and weddings, etc (CODEO, 2013). These impose huge financial burden on MPs and in their quest to dodge such burdens and demands, they shy away from all interactive sessions and boycott platforms that brings them closer to

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their citizens (Lindberg, 2010; Ayee, 2016). There is also anecdotal evidence that points to the fact that some MPs also abandon their task of visiting to consult and interact with their constituents because of their heavy workload as career MPs and ministers or deputy ministers.<sup>3</sup> Some MPs almost lost their seats in the 2016 Parliamentary Elections because they devoted time to serving in other capacities as ministers, deputy ministers, majority leaders, minority leaders, etc. For instance, the constituents of the then minority leader of Parliament, Osei Kyei-Mensah Bonsu threatened to vote him out of Parliament for neglecting his responsibilities towards his constituency (CODEO, 2013).<sup>4</sup> Even though the MP had excelled as a minority leader, to his constituents, he had failed as their representative because he could not visit his constituency regularly to interact with them.

#### **Conclusion**

The quality of representation in Ghana is weak as majority MPs are unable to interact regularly with their constituents to get clearer picture of what must be done in the interest of the constituents. Even though they visit their constituents, there is no deliberate effort on the part of MPs to dialogue and interact with their constituents on matters directly affecting them. There is therefore inadequate connection between the interest of constituents and the decisions taken on their behalf by MPs. Anecdotal evidence abounds to show how the general Ghanaian citizenry has decried and expressed disappointment with the voting pattern of MPs on certain core issues of direct consequence to them. These issues could have been decided differently, had constituents been consulted. Many MPs are pre-occupied with the discussion of key national policy issues and legislations on the floor of Parliament and tend to ignore or completely disregard the need to institutionalize a dialogue and interactive platform to pick the views of their constituents on matters directly affecting them. Parliamentary representation in Ghana is therefore a façade and unfortunately, there are no mechanisms to re-call MPs who are unable to adequately represent the interests of their constituents.<sup>5</sup> To deal with the challenges and improve the quality of parliamentary representation in Ghana, four key but related recommendations may be considered as follows:

First, MPs must not be oblivious of their foremost function and role as representatives of the interest of their constituents. They must know that they were elected to serve the people albeit on the tickets of political parties. To give true meaning to the concept of representation, all parliamentarians must establish and institutionalize dialogue and interactive platforms (such as Town

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Hall Meetings) where they can meet their constituents periodically to discuss matters affecting them. Again, MPs must have offices in their constituencies where officials at the constituency level may receive information and convey same to the MPs for redress. These would make MPs better informed about current needs of constituents and help them lobby central governments to channel projects to help tackle such needs.

Second, and related to the above, MPs must work out a synthesis between building their career in Parliament and attending to the needs of their constituents. Irrespective of their additional work in Parliament and key positions they may occupy such as the Majority Leader, Minority Leader, Chief Whip, Ministers of State, etc., this cannot be an excuse for any MP to stay away from the constituency and surface only in the lead up to elections. These other positions MPs may occupy must never be the license for their retention in Parliament by their constituents. In this regard, the practice of some MPs preoccupying themselves with other responsibilities to the near neglect of their constituents must not be countenanced as it undermines parliamentary representation in Ghana.

Third, Civil Society (CSOs) and the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) must collaborate to play a crucial role of embarking on a sustained sensitization and educational drive in the rural localities on the actual role of parliamentarians. There seem to be some elite consensus in Ghana that MPs are not development agents. However, this consensus is yet to trickle down to the grassroots who tend to have unmeasured expectations of their MPs. The situation is worsened by the huge and unrealistic campaign promises made by aspiring MPs in the electioneering campaign processes merely for the purposes of securing votes. The proposed NCCE and CSO collaboration would be useful in making aspiring MPs measured in their campaign promises and help in minimizing demands as well as managing the expectations of the grassroots of their MPs. This is one key way of ensuring a proper dialogue between MPs and their constituents without the former being scared of the financial and other non-financial demands from the latter.

Finally, governments must intensify efforts aimed at rural development to ensure that people in the various constituencies are helped in lifting themselves up from poverty and economic mesmerisation. As long as people remain poor and unemployed, rural constituents will continue to make demands on their MPs in a manner that may always compel such MPs to bolt or stay away from

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the very people they are expected to represent. The Nana Addo campaign promise of One District, One Factory in the lead up to the 2016 General Elections in Ghana, may be a commendable intervention in dealing with rural poverty and under-development when truly and successfully implemented.

#### **Notes**

1. A representative sample of 1,500 individuals aged 18 years and above was randomly selected in three stages from across the 10 regions of the country. The background characteristics of respondents like age, sex, educational level, occupation and marital status were measured. The survey focused on: (i) the interaction between constituents and MPs given that this relationship is an integral aspect of democratic governance; (ii) electorates' voting considerations; (iii) educational qualifications of MPs; (iv) performance of MPs; and (v) ex-gratia payments to MPs.
2. Articulating partisan concerns rather than constituent issues by parliamentarians is exacerbated by the fact that voting in Ghana is generally influenced by partisan considerations. Rational voting during elections is yet to fully develop among the voting populace in Ghana's electoral politics.
3. See examples of this at : <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/27/tragedy-mps-too-busy-constituency-work>
4. See details at: <https://www.modernghana.com/news/622933/kyei-mensah-bonsu-seat-under-threat.html>
5. The only opportunity to re-call a parliamentarian is to vote against him or her in the next parliamentary elections. Apart from this, a deficient MP stays in office until he or she dies or resigns.

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