



Beyond the Ballot: Universal Suffrage and the Quality of Democracy in the Malawian Context

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Article info	Abstract
Received: 2 Dec 2025 Revised: 31 May 2026 Accepted: 27 May 2026 Published online: 20 Aug 2026 Keywords: Beyond the ballot, universal suffrage, democracy quality, civic literacy, and Malawi	This paper examines the tension between universal suffrage and the quality of democracy in Malawi, particularly given low levels of formal education and limited civic literacy among the electorate. While Malawi has upheld the principle of “one person, one vote” since the advent of multiparty democracy in 1994, electoral outcomes are often shaped by regionalism, ethnicity, patronage, and misinformation rather than informed policy evaluation. The study employed comparative historical inquiry and thematic analysis of secondary literature and documentary sources to examine the relationship between universal suffrage, civic literacy, and democratic quality in Malawi. Drawing historical comparisons with early Western democracies, which initially restricted suffrage to educated or property-owning men, this study highlights that Malawi’s democratic challenges are not unique but are exacerbated by widespread political illiteracy and the prevalence of personality-driven politics. Although restricting voting rights based on education is incompatible with constitutional and international human rights principles, the paper argues that meaningful democracy in Malawi requires significant investment in civic education, robust political literacy programs, strengthened media independence, and issue-based political engagement. The findings suggest that enhancing the electorate’s capacity to make informed choices is essential for improving governance quality and advancing national development without undermining democratic inclusivity.

Introduction

Democracy is widely heralded as the most inclusive and empowering form of governance. It is built upon the foundational principle of universal suffrage: the right of every adult citizen, typically from the age of 18, to vote. However, the practical application of this principle in developing countries such as Malawi presents a profound dilemma. In a society where the majority of the population lacks formal education and critical and adequate civic understanding, concerns arise about whether universal suffrage has helped Malawi make informed and rational electoral decisions to elect competent and visionary leaders. According to the National Statistical Office (NSO, 2019), 68.6% of Malawians have only primary-level education, 16.3% have attained secondary education, and only 1.9% have post-secondary education, such as college, university, or vocational training. This situation raises a critical question: Can an electorate with limited formal education reliably choose competent and visionary leaders? Given that Malawi recently conducted a general election in September 2025, this study examines the relationship between electoral participation, civic literacy, and democratic quality in Malawi. This study employs

a qualitative design based on document analysis and comparative historical inquiry. The objective is not to measure voting behaviour statistically but rather to examine the relationship between universal suffrage, civic literacy, and democratic quality within the Malawian context through an analysis of existing literature, policy documents, constitutional provisions, and historical experiences of democratic development. The study draws on secondary sources, including publications on democracy and electoral behaviour in Malawi, government reports, census data from the National Statistics Office, reports from international organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and United Nations (UN), and historical literature on the evolution of suffrage in Western democracies. These sources were selected because they provide relevant evidence on educational attainment, political participation, civic engagement, and democratic governance.

The Democratic Ideal versus Democratic Practice

Since adopting multiparty democracy in 1994, Malawi has embraced the principle of “one person, one vote” in its elections, regardless of educational attainment (Republic of Malawi, 1994). This principle reflects the global democratic ethos of equality, inclusion, and freedom. However, the practice of democracy in Malawi has faced persistent challenges, including clientelism, regional voting, ethnic voting, misinformation, and low political literacy (Dulani, 2011; Patel & Wahman, 2020). These realities raise legitimate concerns about the quality of electoral outcomes in a system where many citizens may lack the knowledge needed to evaluate policies or leaders objectively. Malawi’s democracy is founded on the principle of universal suffrage, whereby every adult citizen has the right to vote. This system assumes that voters will make rational choices, selecting leaders based on policies, competence, and vision. However, the effectiveness of this principle depends on the electorate’s ability to make informed decisions. In the Malawian context, existing studies on electoral behaviour suggest that voters are mainly influenced by a combination of factors, including regionalism, ethnicity, patronage, short-term incentives such as handouts, and misinformation (Dulani, 2011; Patel & Wahman, 2020). These factors often interact with one another. For instance, economic vulnerability may increase the appeal of patronage-based politics, while regional and ethnic identities may influence perceptions of political representation and trust. Although civic and voter education initiatives have expanded considerably since the democratic transition in 1994, scholars continue to debate the extent to which these programs have transitioned into sustained issue-based voting and informed political participation. Consequently, concerns regarding democratic quality are better understood by examining the interaction of multiple social, political, and institutional factors rather than by attributing the challenge solely to voters’ educational attainment, as the challenge remains in access to reliable political information and the electorate’s ability to evaluate competing policy alternatives critically.

Historical Lessons from Western Democracies

The dilemma facing Malawi is not unique. Similar concerns regarding voter competence, political literacy, identity-based voting, and democratic accountability have been observed in other African democracies. This suggests that although universal suffrage has strengthened political inclusion and citizen participation, electoral behaviour continues to be influenced by factors such as ethnicity, regional affiliation, patronage networks, socioeconomic conditions, and access to political information (Beckman, 2008). These experiences demonstrate that the tension between democratic inclusion and the quality of democratic outcomes is a broader challenge confronting many emerging democracies.

Historically, early democratic societies in the West, including France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, restricted voting rights to educated or property-owning men on the assumption that only such individuals could make rational decisions about governance (Anderson, 1991). For instance, during and after the French Revolution, suffrage was limited to “active citizens”, namely men of property and education, thereby excluding the majority of the population (Hobsbawm, 1996). Universal suffrage in these countries was achieved only after gradual expansions that were accompanied by increased access to education and civic engagement. Although these developments are generally associated with increased political awareness and citizen engagement, scholars

continue to debate the extent to which educational advancement alone leads to better electoral decision-making or improved democratic outcomes. Electoral behaviour continues to be influenced by ideology, identity, economic interest, and partisan loyalties. This historical experience highlights the importance of civic capacity-building without implying that education automatically guarantees superior democratic outcomes.

The Case of Malawi: Challenges of Limited Civic Information

The influence of handouts, ethnic loyalties, and media manipulation has often marred Malawi's democratic elections. Political campaigns in Malawi frequently rely more on personality politics and material inducements than on policy platforms (Chinsinga, 2006). This trend is exacerbated by widespread illiteracy and limited civic education, especially in rural areas. Consequently, voting choices in Malawi are influenced more by immediate material benefits, personalities, regional or ethnic identity than by an understanding of national development priorities. Over the years, Malawi has made notable progress in improving literacy levels, with the national literacy rate reaching approximately 65.8% in 2021. Nevertheless, basic reading and writing skills alone are insufficient to enable citizens to make well-informed and rational choices when selecting capable leaders. Evidence suggests that democratic participation continues to be shaped by broader institutional and economic factors. This environment has enabled populist and at times, corrupt politicians to thrive, often at the expense of national progress. Additionally, weak political institutions, limited media independence, and the absence of robust civic education further undermine the quality of democratic participation and electoral accountability. As a result, Malawi's democracy, although procedurally functional, struggles to deliver meaningful leadership and development outcomes. The ongoing challenge is to strengthen the electorate's capacity to make informed choices and hold leaders accountable in a rapidly evolving political landscape.

Should Voting Be Restricted?

While it may be tempting to consider limiting voting rights to only the "rational" or "educated", drawing parallels from early French or American democratic experiments would contradict modern democratic principles and international human rights norms. Denying voting rights based on education would be inconsistent with Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms equal participation in government for all citizens. Similarly, sections 40(1) and 40(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi enshrine political rights, including the right to vote, as fundamental and inalienable (Republic of Malawi, 1994). Furthermore, restricting suffrage may only deepen inequalities, disenfranchise marginalised groups, and provoke political unrest. In the Malawi context, therefore, the central question is not who should vote, but how to create the conditions for informed participation of all citizens.

What Should Malawi Do?

The preceding discussion suggests that improving democratic quality requires addressing broader conditions that shape electoral behaviour. Because voting decisions are influenced by multiple factors, including civic knowledge, access to information, socioeconomic conditions, and political institutions, reforms should focus on strengthening the environment within which democratic participation occurs. Therefore, restricting voting rights is not a viable solution. For Malawi to achieve a meaningful and effective democracy, it must strike a balance between the democratic principle of universal suffrage and the need for rational, informed electoral choices. This calls for greater investment in civic education. Institutions such as NICE should be adequately funded to actively conduct civic education campaigns that enhance political literacy and promote issue-based voting, as emphasised by Chirwa (2019). Moreover, political education should be integrated into the school curriculum to cultivate a future generation of informed voters. Efforts must also be made to combat political misinformation by strengthening media independence, improving media regulation, and empowering community radio stations. Given that many rural Malawians rely on radio for information, community broadcasting can play a vital role in promoting political awareness and informed public debate. Although these reforms may be perceived as threatening by political elites

who benefit from limited civic awareness, the long-term goal must be to place national development above narrow political interests.

Conclusion

The dilemma of democracy in Malawi underscores a critical tension between inclusivity and quality governance. Although historical examples show that suffrage was sometimes restricted based on perceived rational capacity, modern democratic values reject exclusion in favour of empowerment. The solution lies not in limiting the vote but in improving the quality of civic engagement. Democracy in Malawi can flourish only when every citizen, regardless of education level, is equipped with the knowledge and tools needed to make informed decisions. This is not only a democratic necessity but also a developmental imperative. The study acknowledges that its reliance on secondary data limits its ability to establish direct causal relationships between educational attainment and voting behaviour. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as a conceptual and analytical contribution to ongoing debates regarding democratic quality and civic empowerment in Malawi. Future research could build on this work through surveys, interviews, or other empirical methods that directly examine voters' decision-making processes.

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