



Politics originally had nothing to do with parties or politicians! It was actually the public relationships between citizens themselves and the ways in which they engaged each other on matters of common interest.

But in today's world, politics has become detached from citizens - especially young people. Battles between political leaders play themselves out in newspapers and on TV, and the ideas of citizens seem to matter less and less. As a result, politics has become the domain of Government, political parties and the media - and citizens often feel sidelined or completely left out.

## **A good start to becoming political is developing an understanding of South Africa's political system.**

### **Spheres Of Government**

National government develops policy and legislation (laws): the rules according to which provincial and local government do their work. National government also establishes standards for the provision of services, as a way to ensure similar treatment for citizens in different parts of the country. This applies to issues from agriculture and arts to health and housing, from education and environment to transport and trade. National government is a direct result of the consent given by voters after a national election, which takes place every five years.

While national government has the national policy-making priority, provincial government dominates South Africa's nine regions. Provincially, there is a strong emphasis on services like water, sanitation, transport, electricity, healthcare, education, security and housing in a safe and healthy environment, as well as provincial planning, socio-economic needs, cultural matters and the well-being of the inhabitants of provinces. Provincial governments, like national governments, are elected every five years.

Provincial government oversees local government, which is the sphere of government closest to its citizens. Local government is involved with services that affect people: refuse removal, streets, traffic control and libraries. It is trusted with delivering the goods and services provided for by national and regional policies. Democratically-elected representatives of a local community are known as councillors and they are elected by South African voters every four years in municipal (local) elections.

**South Africa has three spheres or levels of Government: national, provincial and local. The idea of dividing Government into different spheres is part of a process called decentralisation; a way of ensuring that not all government power is concentrated in the centre or at the top.**

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## Branches Of Government

### The Executive Branch

The executive branch (made up of the president, deputy president and Cabinet) is what people usually mean when they say "Government". The Cabinet consists of ministers appointed by the president. Each minister is responsible for a different government department. They are accountable to Parliament and report back regularly on their work.

After laws have been passed by Parliament, they become the responsibility of a particular department or group of departments. This is the work that gives the executive branch its name. "To execute" means to carry out laws and policies.

### You and The Executive

**Citizens can influence government policies by communicating their ideas to Cabinet ministers and decisionmakers. Often, when Government is developing a new policy, it publishes a draft called a "Green Paper". The Green Paper is intended for public discussion and is open to change. Once groups of citizens and experts have responded to ideas in the Green Paper, a "White Paper" is produced. It's the final version of the policy and usually forms the basis of new legislation.**

### You and Parliament

**Citizens can affect decisions on national and provincial levels, because they have the right to communicate with any MP or member of the NCOP. Perhaps the easiest way for citizens to participate in law-making is by making submissions to parliamentary committees or by attending public hearings.**

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**You and The Judiciary Judges and magistrates are expected to do their work without interference from citizens. But there are instances where citizens are able to solve disputes on their own, without taking them to court. By knowing how to stand up for your rights and by respecting the rights of others, you develop your own conflict resolution skills.**

### **The Legislative Branch**

The legislature, or Parliament, runs the lawmaking process. It is made up of two separate structures: the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP). When you vote in national elections, you elect the people who will sit in the National Assembly. They are known as Members of Parliament, or MPs.

To help Parliament in its work, there are four different types of parliamentary committees. MPs sit on at least one, and sometimes several. Each committee has a special focus and it is here that the most detailed discussions on proposed laws take place. If Parliament feels that a proposed law (known as a bill) requires more work, it is passed on to the relevant committee for improvements or changes.

### **The Judicial Branch**

The judiciary plays no role in proposing or passing laws, but it is responsible for applying them. It's made up of all the courts, from the Constitutional Court and the high courts to magistrate's courts and other specialised courts. Courts operate completely independently from Parliament and the Cabinet. Their role is to interpret laws when they have been violated and to enforce them. They are also responsible for upholding the Constitution.

**The judiciary plays a very important role in preventing the abuse of power and protecting the rights of people. It ensures that everyone, including Government, operates within the law!**

### **Party Politics**

#### **What is a Political Party?**

A political party is a formal political group which allows citizens to organise themselves to contest elections. But parties don't exist for elections alone, especially since elections happen only once in five years. Often, they're established to promote a particular vision of how a society and its economy should be structured. This vision is given concrete form in a party's proposals for how major issues - like housing, education and

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unemployment - should be tackled. By recruiting members and building its power base, a party aims to participate in governing a country and to implement key policies.

- Political parties have two main functions: to represent citizens and to assist in the creation of institutions of government.

### What is Multi-Party Democracy?

Multi-partyism is one of the pillars of democracy. In a multi-party system, citizens are free to establish political parties to promote their particular vision for their country. They are also free to support the political party of their choice. In this way, a multi-party system promotes two fundamental human rights: freedom of association and freedom of choice.

### What is an Opposition Party?

In an election, as in most other competitions, there are winners and losers. The winner is the party that gains the most seats in Parliament and has the power to govern the country. But in a multi-party state, parties that receive a lot of support from voters are still able to win seats in Parliament - even if they aren't in the majority. The party that wins the second highest number of seats is generally known as the official opposition.

### What is Proportional Representation?

In political systems based on Proportional Representation, parties prepare lists of candidates for an election. Citizens then vote for a party of their choice, rather than for an individual. Once all the votes are counted, the totals are calculated at national level. Parties are allocated seats in Parliament in proportion to the share of the votes they received in the election.

**There are 400 seats in the South African Parliament, so if a party gets 25% of the vote, it'll be allocated 100 seats (25% of the seats). This means that the top 100 people on that party's list will represent it in Parliament. Parties that receive less than 1% of the vote don't get any seats.**

### Young People And The Vote "I Don't Vote!"

In South Africa and throughout the democratic world, the numbers of young voters are decreasing with each election. But it's important to remember that democracy goes both ways. It's Government's duty to meet your needs and represent your interests. But you also have a responsibility to contribute to democracy by voting. If you haven't voted, you can't complain that Government hasn't met its obligations - because you haven't met your obligations either!

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Remember that winning the election isn't the only goal. An election provides an opportunity for all citizens to speak together about how they want the country to be governed. And in order for the election result to reflect the will of all people, it's important for everyone to have their say.

## The Electoral Process

In order to vote, you must be a registered voter. This means that when you present yourself at the voting station, your name must appear on the voters' roll. When voting, take your green barcoded ID book (or valid temporary ID, see Apply for an ID Book, Passport and Visa) to your local voting station.

A recent amendment to the Electoral Act makes it possible for people to vote in a different centre to where they're registered. You can vote at any voting station, provided that you have a sticker in your ID book to prove that you're a registered voter.

## NOTE

### You have the right to vote on three levels

- for South Africa's ruling party and ministers on the national level;
- for the provincial legislature on the provincial level; and
- for your municipal authority on the local level.

To check if you're registered to vote, visit <https://www.elections.org.za/am/register.asp>. Enter your ID number in the space provided and then click "Submit".

## Freedom of Expression

Citizens should not forget that they are the ones who own and shape democracy. By interacting with friends, neighbours, colleagues, party canvassers and others, it's possible to get a deeper picture of what the election means than by simply reading the newspaper or watching TV.

Unless citizens are free to express their opinions, healthy democratic debate is impossible. And just as parties should enjoy the freedom to present their policies to voters, voters should have the freedom to praise, question or criticise these policies openly - without fear of being silenced or victimised.

## Information courtesy of YouthVote SA, IDASA and Independent Newspapers

**Freedom of expression is not unlimited – and it's especially important to be aware of this during elections. According to the Constitution, statements or behaviour inciting violence are not allowed. This places a responsibility on political parties and their supporters to be tolerant and not to interfere with the campaign efforts of the others.**

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