

Getting involved in Parliament

Since the advent of democracy in 1994 it has become possible for all citizens to get involved in what is happening in Parliament. It is up to each of us to make full use of all the opportunities we have to try to influence the decisions that our political representatives make at national, provincial and local level.

Direct ways of influencing Parliament include:

- Voting in elections
- Attending meetings
- Submissions, representations and petitions
- Contacting MPs

Indirect ways of influencing Parliament include:

- Keeping yourself informed
- Joining a political party
- Lobbying outside Parliament

Voting in elections

Under the Bill of Rights (Chapter 2 of the Constitution), every citizen has the right to free, fair and regular elections for any legislative body established in terms of the Constitution. Once you turn 18 you become eligible to vote provided you are a South African citizen and have a valid identity document. Make sure that you obtain an identity document and register as a voter as soon as you become eligible - don't risk leaving it until the last minute. Once you have registered, make sure that you vote in elections for all three spheres of government. Your vote is secret. By voting in national and provincial elections, you are having your say in which political party will represent you in Parliament and your provincial legislature. By voting in local government elections, you have your say in which political party and which individual ward candidate will represent you at municipal level.

Attending meetings

The Constitution says Parliament and the provincial legislatures must take measures to facilitate public involvement in their work and in the work of their committees. They must conduct their work in an open way and may not exclude the public or the media from committee sittings unless there is a very good reason to do so. You may attend any sitting of Parliament, and you can attend almost any committee meeting, although you may not speak unless you have permission to make a presentation to a committee.

Submissions, representation and petitions

You have the right to make a written submission to a parliamentary committee about an issue that it is discussing or about an issue you think it should be discussing.

Committees have a duty to take all submissions into account. If an issue is of great public interest, a committee may hold public hearings about it. You or any other interested party may ask the committee for permission to make a presentation at one of these hearings. Working with a group of people is usually a better way of getting attention for your concerns, especially if you want to make a presentation. Another way of trying to influence Parliament is through a petition - the National Assembly has a committee that considers special petitions from the public.

Contacting MPs

Most areas in the country have one or more constituency offices where citizens can directly contact MPs. It is also possible to make contact with MPs or the political party you support through Parliament, P O Box 15, Cape Town, 8000 or telephone (021) 403 2911. All MPs have a direct input into the work of the committees on which they serve as members. Some MPs are more influential than others - for example, the chairperson of a committee will have more influence over what happens there than an ordinary member. Because individual MPs may propose private members' bills, any idea you have for a bill can be submitted to Parliament through an individual MP. Of course, the MP would have to support what you are trying to achieve in the proposed bill.

Keeping yourself informed

In order to be able to influence decisions taken in Parliament and the provincial legislatures, you must keep yourself aware of what is going on in these institutions and in the broader society. Keep in touch by talking to people, reading newspapers, listening to news broadcasts on radio and TV, and finding out about the work programmes of the various legislatures. A regular updated work schedule can be obtained on this website. From time to time, certain committee hearings are advertised in newspapers. Another way of keeping informed about Parliament is by attending report back meetings held by members of Parliament (MPs).

Joining a political party

The Bill of Rights says all citizens have the right:

- To form a political party
- To participate in the activities of, or recruit members for, a political party
- To campaign for a political party or cause
- To stand for public office and, if elected, to hold office

Under our electoral system, voters choose political parties to represent them at national and provincial level. The parties choose the individual candidates who will represent them in Parliament and the provincial legislatures if they receive enough votes in the election. If you want to have a say in which individuals become candidates for election to Parliament, or if you want to become a candidate yourself, you must become a member of a political party. Each party has its own way of choosing its candidate list for Parliament. Depending on how decision making in your party works, you should be able to

influence its political programme in Parliament, its candidate list, and the issues it chooses to focus on in an election campaign. The more successfully you campaign for your party, the greater the chance that it will win seats in Parliament. If MPs are doing their jobs properly, the more seats your party has, the more likely you are to hear political views you agree with expressed in Parliament.

Lobbying

Lobbying means trying to influence parliamentary decision making on, for example, a government policy White Paper or a bill. Drawing up a petition, writing to a committee, making a presentation to a committee, asking an MP to sponsor your proposal as a private members' bill, and trying to get MPs to support a particular cause are all examples of lobbying. Other ways of lobbying include getting public support for an issue by, for example:

- running a media campaign
- producing a newsletter or website based on thorough research
- giving radio and television interviews
- writing articles for a newspaper - bearing in mind that the media has inflexible deadlines and will only carry material that it considers to be newsworthy
- asking experts for advice and assistance
- asking companies to donate their expertise and time to your campaign - for example, asking an advertising agency to create suitable marketing materials and asking a newspaper to carry an advertisement free of charge
- asking prominent people to publicly endorse your campaign
- holding press conferences
- organising pickets or marches and ensuring the media are informed in good time about these events
- collecting signatures for a petition and making plans to submit it to Parliament or another relevant authority
- meeting with political parties to influence their policies
- working together with other like-minded groups like non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs)
- asking for a meeting with the relevant minister
- asking for a meeting with the minister's adviser
- asking for a meeting with the President

The Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of expression, as long as this freedom is not used for propaganda for war, incitement to violence or advocacy or hatred based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion. It also guarantees the right to assemble, demonstrate, picket and present petitions as long as this is done in a peaceful and unarmed way. Democracy is not an event that occurred in 1994 - it is a process to which all of us can contribute by making our voices heard in Parliament, in the provincial legislatures, and in the broader society.