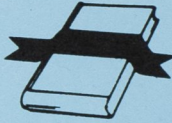


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A

YOU
and
the
VOTE

A Black Sash Publication



A BLACK SASH PUBLICATION

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Please share this book and teach other people about voting.

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YOU AND THE VOTE

Being able to vote is a **democratic right**. All citizens are entitled to choose their leaders and their government.

Even though in the past, some people have been able to choose the leaders of their church groups, trade unions or civics, the majority of South Africans have been denied the right to choose their government.

Sometime soon, all the adults in South Africa will be able to vote.

This booklet is about voting to elect a government or a constituent assembly.

1. What is an election?

It is the special occasion when all adults in South Africa choose the government. The government is the group of people who run the country.

An election could also be held to choose a constituent assembly. This is a group of people who will work together for a short time to draw up the Constitution of the country. This Constitution will lay down the rights of citizens, and will be the basis on which all laws will be made. Future governments must respect the Constitution.

The election for a constituent assembly would be held once only – before the first election for a new government.

The election gives you, the ordinary citizen, the chance to elect (choose) people from the political party whose ideas you agree with. The party that most citizens choose, wins the election. This party will then govern the country until another election is held. Elections for the government are usually held every four or five years. In this way, an election can be a way of changing a bad government.

**All South African adults
are entitled to vote!**

2. How is an election held?

An election is the opportunity for all citizens to vote. It is when you are given the chance to choose the party you want. Perhaps you have voted before – for a church committee or the leaders of an organisation.

Sometimes people vote by a **show of hands**, which is public – you can see how everyone has voted. Another way is a **ballot**, which is a secret vote – you make a mark on a piece of paper to show who you have chosen. No-one can see who you have voted for. Governments should **always** be elected by secret ballot.

A ballot is secret.

3. What the vote can do for you.

Before the election, each political party makes promises about what it will do if it gets the most votes and becomes the new government. You will choose to vote for the party that promises things that you think will be best for you and South Africa. If most people in South Africa vote for that party, your vote will have helped to get the government that you want.

This new government is then expected to carry out its promises.

Remember that members of the party that you voted for are responsible to you. They should try to do the things they promised to do. After the election, they should come to meetings to report to you and to get

your opinions. If they don't do what you expected them to do, you do not have to vote for them next time.

**The government is responsible
to the voters.**

4. What the vote can't do for you.

A new government will probably not be able to provide jobs, houses and good education right away. As all these things will cost a lot of money, the changes will probably be slow. It will take time for decisions to be made, money to be found and projects to be started – only then will ordinary citizens begin to see changes.

A new government will probably change the laws. But this will not always mean that

things will improve quickly. For example, in other countries, the women's and workers' struggles continue, even though laws have been passed that ensure women's and workers' rights. The ordinary citizen will still need to do more than just vote in order to change things. There will still be a need for people to participate in campaigns to make sure that laws are put into practice.

**Voting is only one way
of participating ...**

5. THE ELECTION

(a) A Free and Fair Election:

What is it?

An election is **free** if you, the voter, have the freedom to vote for the person or party of your choice – without being afraid of interference or threats from anyone. The parties and candidates should also be able to hold meetings freely, without being disrupted and without candidates being intimidated.

**A free election
means no intimidation.**

An election is **fair** if all parties have the same opportunities to explain their policies at meetings, to advertise in the newspapers, radio and TV, and to have

their leaders appear on TV. The people who organise the election should make sure that all parties have equal time to speak on radio and TV.

**A fair election means
equal access to the media.**

(b) **Who organises the election?**

A group of people will be chosen by all parties, and they will organise and supervise the election to make sure that the election is really free and fair. This group of people will be the **election authority**. They must be completely unbiased so that no person or party is favoured in any way during the election.

(c) Who can vote?

Usually every citizen over 18 years can vote. This means all women and men over 18 years of age. No-one should be excluded because of race or religious belief.

In some countries, you have to register with a local office before the election day in order to be able to vote. In other countries, you may vote if you have an identity document (ID). We don't yet know how it will be in South Africa, but closer to the time, you will hear on the radio or on TV what you must do if you want to vote. It is important to find out, because, even if you are a citizen and the right age to vote, you can

still miss the chance if you have not followed all the rules.

It is a good idea to get an ID as soon as possible, so that you will be prepared. See page 33 which explains how to get an ID.

You do not have to join a political party in order to vote. There are advantages if you are a member of a political party: you can help to form the policies of the party and choose the party's candidates. You can not be forced to join a political party in order to vote.

You do not even have to tell anyone who you will vote for – it is always a secret ballot.

(d) **Where do you vote?**

A local school or church is usually used as the place where people vote. It is called a **polling station**.

**THIS WAY TO THE
POLLING STATION →**



(e) **When do you vote?**

The polling station is usually open from early in the morning until quite late at night, to give everyone the chance to get to the polling station. In some countries, the polling station remains open for a few days. If you are ill, or too old to get to the polling station, or will be out of the country on election day, you will be allowed to vote before the election day. This is called a **special vote**.

The people in charge of the election (the election authority) will be able to help anyone who needs a special vote.

You will need to contact the election authority before election day to arrange a special vote.

(f) How do you vote?

- i. On voting day, you will go to the polling station.

You may be met by representatives from different political parties who want you to vote for their party. You do not have to speak to these people. Security people will also be present to make sure there is no intimidation.

You will find there are many people who have come to vote, and you may have to stand in a queue. There will be officials who will tell you what to do, but they may not tell you who to vote for.

You will need to show some document which identifies you as a South African citizen over 18 years. (See page 33 which tells you how to get an ID.)

- ii. The election officials will want to make sure that you vote once and once only. One of the ways of doing this is to put an ink mark on your hand or identity document before you vote. The election officials will check your hand or identity document when you arrive at the polling station. You will **not** be allowed to vote a second time if you have already voted.

The rule is one person, one vote!

- iii. We do not yet know whether voting will be for parties or for **candidates** (individual people) from parties, **but**, whichever system is used, the voting will be by **secret ballot**.
- iv. You will be given a piece of paper, which is the **ballot paper** (voting paper), and will be shown to a small private room, called a **booth**. (It is like a telephone booth.) On the ballot paper there will be a list of names of candidates or parties, or a list of symbols or pictures representing parties. You must take your time to study the ballot paper so that you do not make a mistake.

You will then make a cross, **X**, next to the candidate or party or symbol of your choice. If you do not agree with the policies of any of the parties, and do not wish to vote for any of them, you may “spoil” your vote – by making any other mark on the ballot paper, or putting many crosses.

Here is an example of a ballot paper:

BALLOT PAPER

Make a cross (X) next to the party of your choice

The ABC Party	
The DEF Party	
The GHI Party	
The JKL Party	

If you wanted to vote for the GHI

Party, this is how you would mark your ballot paper:

BALLOT PAPER

Make a cross (X) next to the party of your choice

The ABC Party	
The DEF Party	
The GHI Party	X
The JKL Party	

- v. You will then fold the ballot paper, walk out of the booth, and YOU will put your ballot paper into the **ballot box**. This is like a post box – once your ballot paper has been posted, it cannot be pulled out again. You will then leave the polling station. You may have to wait a few days to hear the result of the election.

Because you are the only person who has seen your ballot paper, and because your name does not appear on the ballot paper, no-one else will ever know what you have marked.

- vi. Election officials and party representatives will usually be watching, to ensure that no-one interferes with you or the ballot box.

YOUR VOTE IS YOUR SECRET!

Remember that your vote is secret – nobody can force you to vote for him or her or their party.

- i. Suppose your employer takes you to the polling station and also tells you whom to vote for. As long as you keep quiet about your choice, you do not have to worry about losing your job if you vote for someone else. Your employer can not find out how you voted.
- ii. Suppose the chief controls the pensions in your area. You may be worried about losing your pension if you don't vote for that chief's party. Even if you say you will support such a person, you can still vote for some-

one else. No-one can know how you really voted.

- iii. Even if someone important in your life, perhaps a family member, tries to influence you to vote their way, you can still make your own choice because your vote is secret.

Even if people try to bribe you or intimidate you to vote for a certain candidate or party, they will never be able to find out who you really voted for.

(g) What happens to the ballot papers?

When the time allowed for voting has come to an end, the polling station will be closed. The ballot box will be sealed by the election officials, watched by people from the different political parties. This is so that no more ballot papers can be put into the ballot box, and none can be taken out. The election officials and party representatives will also supervise the removal of the ballot box to a central place where all the votes will be counted. Representatives from all parties will be present at the counting to make sure that all votes are counted and that no votes are counted more than once. Spoilt papers are counted

separately.

When the counting is finished, the election officials will announce the result of the election, and this will be broadcast on the radio and TV so that everyone will know the result.

(h) **Who will be the new government?**

In most democracies, the party which gains the most number of votes will form a new government. Other parties, which receive fewer votes, will be allowed to be in parliament, but they will not control the running of the country. If, however, several parties get a similar number of votes, the parties will have to work together to form a **coalition** government, and the parties will have

to co-operate and agree on policies.

We do not know now what the rules will be, and how a new government will be formed. This will be worked out when a new constitution is drawn up by the constituent assembly before the election.

6. Why should you vote?

The majority of people in this country have never had the vote. In the past, even people who had the vote sometimes chose not to use it. For example, people boycotted elections for the tricameral parliament or for black local authorities.

Now that there is a **one person, one vote** system and everyone can vote, it is very important that you use your vote.

In some countries it is compulsory to vote – in this country it is not. However, even when voting is compulsory, you do not have to vote for a person or party – you can spoil your vote.

The vote is a way of testing whether peo-

ple are happy with the way the country is being run – if most of the people do not like what the government is doing, they can vote for other parties and thereby vote the government out of power.

YOUR VOTE IS POWERFUL!



7. You, the voter have a responsibility
– you must be informed!

(a) Why must you be informed?

Because all parties want to win the election and come to power and may make promises which will be impossible to keep. It is up to you to find out about these promises and decide whether it will be possible for these to become reality.

(b) How do you become informed?

- i. By finding out about **all** parties and comparing their policies.
- ii. By attending meetings where you can ask questions.
- iii. By talking to people at work and in community groups. If your group

is uncertain about a party's policies and promises, ask the candidates from different parties (or even an independent person) to come and speak to your work or community group or union.

- iv. By reading newspapers, listening to the radio, watching TV – **but** you must be aware of who controls the radio and TV stations. For example, if the government still controls the SABC (radio and TV) at the time of the election, you can expect that the reporting will favour the government and its supporters.

8. How will it affect you if the party you voted for doesn't win the election?

Democracy is all about the people deciding who should govern. If most people vote for a party which you did not vote for, it means that you may not agree with the new government. But your party will still be able to campaign, and it will become the 'watch-dog', making sure that the government does not abuse its power. You will still be able to support your party. Your party will be in **opposition**. Having an "opposition" is what makes democracy work. It prevents a government from taking too much power, and makes sure that the Constitution is respected. It means that the voices of all the people are heard in parliament, not just the

voices of those who voted for the winning party. If your party works hard enough and convinces more people to vote for it next time, then your party could win the next election.

The opposition party
is like a watchdog.

9. What is a referendum?

Sometimes a government would like to know whether ordinary people agree with a new law which it would like to pass, or would like to know how the people feel about certain actions it has taken. The government will then hold a **referendum**. This is also a voting procedure, and you will have to go to the polling station and vote. The difference between a referendum and an election is that instead of voting for parties or candidates, you would just be voting in favour of, or against, a statement about something which is very important to the country. You would not be voting for a person, you would just be indicating whether you agree with the statement or not. You will not be electing a new government.

How To Get an Identity Document (ID)

1. To get an ID a person should go to the nearest office of the Department of Home Affairs with two passport photographs. You can expect to have to pay a small amount for the ID.
2. If you do not have passport photographs, there is usually a photographer at or near the Home Affairs office so it is easy to get the passport photographs which will be ready while you wait. You will probably have to pay the photographer for the photographs.
3. A form has to be filled in, but if you cannot do that yourself the clerk will do it.
4. Your fingerprints will be taken. (This is now for people of all race groups. It is no longer

only black people who have to give their fingerprints.)

5. If you still have an old Reference Book, take that with you as it makes things quicker.
6. If you have never had a Reference Book or an ID before, you will be asked for proof of your birth. The best proof of birth is your birth certificate. If you do not have a birth certificate you will need other documents to prove your birth.
7. A baptismal certificate is helpful. If you are baptised but have lost your baptismal certificate go to the church and ask for a copy. Churches keep the records of all baptisms.
8. If you are not baptised then other documents might help such as clinic cards from

when you were a baby, primary school letters, an old house permit showing your name, a letter from a chief of the area where you were born, or a letter from the owner of the farm where you were born.

9. If you have no birth certificate you may also be asked to provide proof that your parents were South African citizens. You could show their Reference Books or ID's, a marriage certificate, an old house permit, or death certificates. You may be asked to bring your most senior relative to the Home Affairs office with you.
10. If you have any difficulties with this, please consult an advice office in your area or the Priest or Minister at a local Church.

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