

Your representatives in Parliament

Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected to represent the people. Part of their work as public representatives is done inside Parliament and part of it is done directly with citizens during constituency weeks.

Parliament's mandate

Parliament is elected by South African citizens who are 18 years old and who have registered to vote. It is the legislature (lawmaking body) in the national sphere of government.

- The National Assembly is elected every five years in national elections to represent the people and ensure government under the Constitution.
- The National Council of Provinces (NCOP) is elected by provincial legislatures to ensure that provincial interests are taken into account in the national sphere of government. Each of the nine provincial legislatures is elected in provincial elections every five years.

MPs represent all citizens, even those who were unable to vote in the last national and provincial elections.

Constituency work

The programme of Parliament has two main components - parliamentary sessions (when work is done in plenary groups and committees) and constituency weeks. Previous Sections explain what MPs do when Parliament is in session. During constituency weeks MPs have a duty to be available to the public, to help solve problems, and to report back to their constituents on what is happening in Parliament. The purpose of these weeks is to encourage MPs to remain in contact with the people they represent - to create a link between Parliament and the people. Parties are entitled to a monthly allowance for each MP to run a constituency office, and each political party makes its own constituency arrangements. Most constituency offices employ an administrator to be available to the public even when Parliament is in session. Contact the political party you support to find out about constituency offices in your area.

Accountability of MPs

Because MPs are elected representatives, they must be accountable to the people of South Africa and they must act in the public interest. Parties are elected on the strength of what they stand for, and party MPs should be able to explain what they have been doing to carry out their programmes. Because Parliament's mandate is temporary (elections are held every five years), MPs are accountable in the sense that they may not be re-elected if they are not good public representatives or if they do not deliver on party promises. MPs are also accountable to their own parties - the whips of the various political parties maintain internal party discipline in Parliament.

The accountability of South African MPs is related to the electoral system. Under our proportional representation (PR) party list system, voters choose political parties, not individual candidates. Political parties draw up party lists of candidates who fill the seats if the party receives enough votes to be represented in Parliament. Parties hold the seats, not individuals. If an MP resigns, leaves the party, is expelled or dies, the party chooses another person to take the seat. This puts a lot of power in the hands of parties - MPs who ignore party discipline or who 'cross the floor' to join another party will lose their seats in Parliament.

- Critics of PR say the system makes MPs more accountable to their parties than to the voters. They say that a constituency-based system (in which voters in a geographical area vote for an individual candidate) encourages greater accountability to the voters because there is a direct link between the area and an individual MP. Because MPs are not subject to the same kind of party discipline in this kind of system, they can cross the floor or vote against the party line without risking their seats in Parliament.
- Supporters of PR point to the strengths of the system (for example, it ensures a much fairer representation of political parties in Parliament) and say that MPs are not necessarily more accountable in a constituency-based electoral system. Going against a party line or crossing the floor to join another party is not necessarily motivated by issues of political principle - it could be motivated by career or other considerations. Regardless of the electoral system, some MPs will maintain good links with their constituencies and others not.

Representivity

One of the strengths of the PR system is that even small parties have a change of winning seats, so a wide variety of political views are represented. PR also allows parties to compile their lists of candidates in a way that reflects the diversity of the population. This feature enables South Africa to be highly ranked in the world in terms of the proportion of women in Parliament. This enables parties to choose candidates who represent the full spectrum of ethnic, cultural, language and religious identities as well as rich and poor, urban and rural, more and less educated, and people with disabilities. The current system enables parties to choose candidates who will make good MPs, even if they do not have a high level of popular support. It is of course possible for parties to choose candidates for their loyalty to the party rather than their ability to be good public representatives.

Ethics and members' interests

MPs are in a powerful position to influence high-level decision making. There may be times when their personal or business interests conflict with their role as elected officials representing the public interest. For example, imagine if a member of a parliamentary transport committee owns shares in a bus company being scrutinised by the committee. While the public interest may require robust criticism, this MP might want to look after his or her own financial interests by protecting the company instead.

A committee of both Houses of Parliament develops standards of ethical behaviour for MPs and administers a code of conduct. Among other things:

- MPs discussing an issue before Parliament must declare any financial or business interest they, their spouses, their permanent companions or their business partners may have in the issue and offer to withdraw from the discussion
- MPs who make any representation to a member of the Cabinet or an organ of state about an issue are expected to declare any financial or business interest they, their spouses, their permanent companions or their business partners may have in the issue
- MPs may not be paid for lobbying
- MPs may only do other paid work if their parties agree, and if the work is compatible with their function as public representatives

MPs are expected to register their financial interests in Parliament and those of their spouses, dependents and permanent companions every year. These interests include:

- shares and other financial interests in companies, including directorships and partnerships
- paid employment outside Parliament
- consultancies and sponsorships
- gifts and hospitality from a source other than a family member or permanent companion and any other material benefit
- foreign travel other than personal visits paid for by the member, business visits unrelated to the MP's role as a public representative, and official visits paid for by the state or the MP's party
- ownership and other interests in land and property
- pensions

Most of this information is open to the public. The confidential part of the register includes details about the monetary value of MPs' interests and all details about spouses, dependent children and permanent companions of MPs.