

Government Elections: National, Regional, Local

Elections are the process by which members of a community or country choose representatives to hold positions at various levels of government.

Citizens 18 years old and older may **vote** for representatives at the various levels of government – the President, the National Assembly, Regional Councils and Local Authority Councils. However, there is an additional residency requirement for voting at local level. The right to vote is guaranteed by the Constitution.

Every citizen aged 21 or older has the constitutional right to be **elected to public office**, with one exception – a person who wants to be elected as President must be a citizen of Namibia by birth or descent, and over the age of 35.

Regular elections ensure that government is answerable to the people. If the government does not perform to the satisfaction of the voters, they can vote for a different political party or candidate in the next election. Elected representatives are responsible to the voters who elect them.

Voting is done in secret, so that no one can intimidate voters or victimise them for their choices. Namibia originally used paper ballots which voters marked, but now elections generally use voting machines which record the voter's choice electronically.

The Constitution protects the right of citizens to peaceful political activity aimed at influencing the composition and policies of the government. This includes the right to join existing political parties or to form new political parties and the right to participate in public affairs directly or through elected representatives.

The **Electoral Commission of Namibia** is responsible for overseeing all elections in Namibia, and for carrying out educational activities to raise public awareness on elections, democracy building and political tolerance.

Citizens who want to vote must **register** as voters before the election takes place. General registration of voters takes place every 10 years, but supplementary voter registration generally takes place shortly before each election, in order to register people who have just become eligible to vote and to capture changes of address.

There are several safeguards to make sure that this process is fair and accurate. Anyone who is refused registration can appeal. The provisional voters' register must be made available to the public before the election, and individuals or political parties can object to the inclusion of specific names if they believe these that these people are not actually entitled to vote. An **Electoral Tribunal**, which is similar to a magistrate's court, will decide these questions before the election takes place.

Electoral Tribunals can also address illegal conduct by political parties or election officials which takes place before the polling day. The decisions of the Electoral Tribunal can be appealed to the Electoral Court, which is similar to a High Court, and the decisions of the Electoral Court can be appealed to the Supreme Court.

After an election has taken place, a challenge to the election on the grounds that the law was not properly followed will in most cases go directly to the **Electoral Court**, which must make a decision before the elected officials in question take office. The exception is elections for President, where challenges go directly to the Supreme Court for decision. These processes are designed to ensure that elections in Namibia are free and fair.

Elections for President: The President is elected directly by the people of Namibia every five years. The voters cast their ballots for the person they want as President. The President must get more than half of the votes cast to be elected. If no candidate gets more than half the votes, then there must be a run-off election between the two candidates who received the highest number of votes. ►



One type of electronic voting machine (EVM)

Political parties must register to participate in an election. To register, they must show that they have the support of at least 3500 registered voters from at least seven different regions. Political parties must not advocate violence, and they may not restrict membership on the basis of sex, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status.

Elections for National Assembly: The members of the National Assembly are elected on a proportional representation basis every five years. “Proportional representation” means that each political party submits a list of its preferred candidates before an election. Voters cast their ballots for a party and not for a candidate. After the election, parties will be represented in the National Assembly in proportion to the number of votes they received. Put simply, this means that if a political party receives 60% of the vote, it will receive 60% of the seats in the National Assembly.

Citizens can register and vote for the President and the National Assembly anywhere in the country.

Elections for Regional Councils: The voters in each constituency elect one person to represent them on the Regional Council every five years. The members of Regional Councils stand for election in a particular constituency, and are directly elected by the people who live in that constituency. Voters cast their ballots for individual candidates, not for political parties. Candidates for a regional council can be either (a) people who are sponsored by political parties which are registered to take part in the election, or (b) independent candidates who are supported by at least 150 registered voters in the constituency where they want to stand for office.

Namibia has been divided into regions by a Boundaries Delimitation and Demarcation Commission appointed by the President. To “delimit” something means to decide where its boundaries are. Each region is divided into constituencies by the Commission. The “constituencies” make up, or “constitute”, each region. According to the Constitution, there can be 6 to 12 constituencies in each region. The boundaries of regions and constituencies may have to be changed from time to time as the population of the various areas grows or changes, and new regions and constituencies may sometimes be created.

A person who is elected to represent a constituency on the council must go to live in that constituency within three months after the election if he or she is not already resident there. The reason for this rule is that the purpose of regional government is to bring government closer to the people.

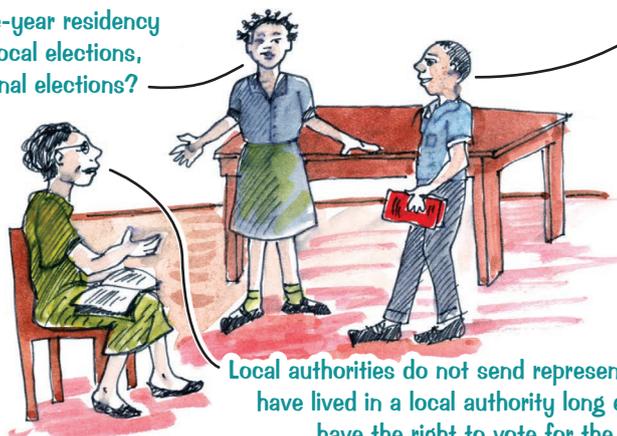
**Citizens must register and vote for a regional council in the constituency where they live.
All citizens are eligible to vote in the constituency where they live, no matter how long they have lived there.**

Elections for Local Councils: Every five years, voters in each local authority select political parties which have put together a list of candidates. Candidates on the list must have been living in that local authority for at least one year. Each party will take people from its party list to fill the number of seats on the council which is proportional to the number of votes received by the party in that local authority. Associations and organisations can also register to put forward candidates for local elections if they can show that at least 250 members of their group are registered voters for that local authority and support their participation in the election.

The law on local authorities requires **affirmative action for women**. “Affirmative action” is a positive step to help a group of people who have been disadvantaged in the past. Because women have suffered special discrimination in Namibia in the past, there are special measures to help women gain seats on local authority councils. Each political party participating in a local authority election must include a specified number of women on its list of candidates, with the number depending on the size of the council. Party lists for councils of 10 or fewer members must include 3 women, and party lists for councils of 11 or more members must include 5 women. Because of this affirmative action, women are very well-represented on local authority councils. ■

**Citizens are eligible to vote for the council of a local authority if they have been living in that local authority for at least one year. When people register to vote in a local authority, they must bring proof of residence.
This means that not every Namibian citizen will be eligible to vote for a local authority council.**

Why is there a one-year residency requirement for local elections, but not for regional elections?



Not everyone in Namibia lives within the borders of a local authority, but everyone lives in a region. Since regional councils send representatives to the National Council, it is important for every Namibian citizen to vote in one region or another. If there were a one-year residency requirement for regional elections, people who had recently moved would be left out.

Local authorities do not send representatives to the national level. So only people who have lived in a local authority long enough to understand its issues and its needs have the right to vote for the members of the local authority council.