

WESTERN CAPE PROVINCIAL PARLIAMENT



UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY

What is Democracy?

Democracy is a system of governance—a way of governing a country. The most common definition of democracy is “government by the people.” This basically means that the people give the government a mandate (their permission) to run the country on their behalf. Through their right to vote, the people are given the opportunity to choose, in regular, free and fair elections, the political parties and politicians who will represent them in government.

Once it had been elected, the government has many responsibilities. It is responsible for managing resources like land, water and public services to ensure that people’s basic needs are met. The people are required to pay taxes to the government and this money is used to pay for services like basic health care and education, social grants and pensions, roads, housing, water and so forth.

While free and fair elections are an essential part of democracy, democracy is about more than just voting. Democracy also gives citizens the opportunity to participate in government at the local level. Citizen participation helps ensure that elected representatives and officials are accountable for their actions. They are expected to act honestly and efficiently and to deliver on the promises they made during their election campaigns, and to be open and transparent in their actions.

When the majority of citizens vote for the government, they effectively give the state a mandate to pass and enforce laws on their behalf. If the government becomes unpopular, the governing party may be voted out of power and replaced by an opposition party or coalition of parties. However, this does not happen very easily.

Principles of Democracy

Participation

People have a right and a duty to vote in elections and join political and civil society organisations.

Equality

All people should be treated equally and without discrimination and be given equal opportunities.

Tolerance

Everyone, including minority groups, should be allowed to express their opinions and join political, religious or civil society organisations of their own choice.

Accountability

Government must be accountable to the people for its actions, including the laws that are passed and how these laws are implemented.

Transparency

Government must report openly and honestly—it must be “transparent” (like a window) in its dealings with the public.

Regular, Free and Fair Elections

Elections must happen regularly and in a free and fair way, without intimidation, corruption or threats to any member of the public.

Accepting the results of Elections

When a political party loses an election, its leaders and supporters must accept the outcome of the election.

Human Rights

The human rights of individuals and groups should be protected, as stipulated in the Bill of Rights

Rule of Law

The rules of law means that no one is above the law, including the president or leader of the country.

Multi-Party System

More than one political party must be allowed to participate in elections and play a role in government.

