



**ZIMBABWE ELECTION
SUPPORT NETWORK**

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FACT SHEET

SUFFRAGE IN ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

Introduction

The Constitution establishes a multi-party democratic political system with “universal suffrage and equality of votes”. Every five years elections are held to elect a President, parliamentarians, and members of local councils.

Suffrage means the right to vote in elections. Voting is a fundamental democratic right as it is a crucial way to influence governmental decision-making. The electorate may elect a new government if they decide that the current government has failed to meet its mandate in fulfilling citizen needs and aspirations. The electoral system provides for an orderly transfer of power to a newly elected government.

Eligibility to vote

All Zimbabwean citizens who are at least 18 years of age and are registered as voters are entitled to vote in elections. The Fourth Schedule of the Constitution of Zimbabwe sets out which persons are disqualified from being registered as voters: these are mentally disordered persons detained under the Mental Health Act, persons declared by a court to be incapable of managing their affairs and persons convicted of electoral offences and declared by the High Court to be disqualified from voting.

Universal suffrage envisages that all persons eligible to vote will be registered as voters and will be able to vote, although eligible voters are not obliged to register and registered voters are not compelled to vote. Voters must be able to vote freely for candidates and political parties of their own choice and must not be intimidated into voting for a candidate or political party.

The polling station specific voting system has allowed undue pressure to be applied, particularly on rural voters and in the future elections, the electoral commission must take concerted steps to prevent this. Political parties must not be permitted to bribe voters to vote for them. The incumbent government must not utilize State resources when campaigning.

Voter Education

Voter education programmes must stress the importance of maximum participation in elections. Civil Society Organisations and the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission should provide ongoing civic voter education programmes to increase voter literacy especially amongst marginalised groups such as youths, women, illiterate persons and persons with disabilities. Voter education should also reach secondary and tertiary education institutions, first-time voters and voters in rural and remote communities.

Voter registration

Given the importance of elections in a democracy, it is vitally important that as many eligible voters as possible take part in elections by registering as voters and freely voting.

There is an urgent need to overcome apathy and scepticism about participation in elections from those who believe that past elections have not been free and fair.

ZEC registers voters and compiles voters' rolls. The continuous biometric registration system must be administered efficiently and transparently to ensure that all persons eligible to vote are able to register. The accuracy of the voter's roll is essential for a fair election and post-registration deduplication must be properly conducted to eliminate duplicate entries and “ghost voters”. The rolls must be open to inspection and electronic copies of the rolls must be available in advance of elections to allow proper auditing.

Diaspora voting

A system must be introduced to allow eligible Zimbabwean citizens living outside the country to register as voters by post or on line, and to vote through a system such as a postal voting system.

Various categories of persons living in Zimbabwe encounter logistical difficulties in registering as voters and casting their ballots.

- Homebound disabled people and frail elderly people unable to go to registration centres and their polling stations. Mobile registration should be used to facilitate the registration of such persons. These persons should also be allowed to vote by post or through proxies.
- Persons incarcerated in prisons. These persons are not disqualified as voters and therefore have to right to participate in elections. Again, there should be a system to allow them to register and to enable them to vote by post or under a system of postal or special voting with safeguards to ensure that they are able to vote freely.
- Persons manning polling stations on election day at places away from where they are registered to vote. These could participate by either postal or special voting.
- Security personnel carrying out security duties on election day away from their voting stations. A system of special voting should be re-introduced but with proper safeguards to ensure that commanding officers do not dictate for whom their subordinates should vote and the system should be open to proper observation.

Standing for elections Presidential elections

A Presidential candidate must be a Zimbabwean citizen by birth or descent, at least 40 years old, ordinarily resident in Zimbabwe and registered as a voter. (Section 91 Constitution.)

The Electoral Act (section 104) provides that the candidate's nomination paper must be signed by at least ten persons from each of the provinces. (total 100) The persons signing the nomination papers must be registered on the voters' rolls for constituencies within the province concerned.

Recently the Justice Minister indicated that government was considering measures to ensure that only “serious” candidates stand for election as President by increasing nomination fees and perhaps increasing the required number of persons who must sign the nomination paper to 1000:

Whilst it is desirable that Presidential candidates demonstrate they have a reasonable amount of support for their candidature throughout the country, the minimum amount of support must and the fees must not be set so high that it becomes logistically problematical for even “serious” candidates to obtain all the nomination endorsements and raise the required fees in the limited time available before the nomination court sits.

Parliamentary elections

Under section 125 candidates for election to the National Assembly must be at least 21 years of age and registered as a voter(s). They must also not be disqualified from being registered as a voter in terms of section 125 of the Constitution.

The setting of the minimum age of 21 for candidates should be changed to 18 in line with the voting age of 18 to encourage young people to stand for election,.

The nomination paper for a candidate must be signed by at least five persons who are registered on the voters' roll for the constituency for which the candidate seeks election. (Section 46 of the Electoral Act.)

There may again be an argument for increasing the number of persons who need to endorse the nomination of the candidate.

The women's quota

In terms of section 124 (b) of the 2013 Constitution, there is a quota system for women in which sixty women (six from each province) are elected through a system of proportional representation based on the votes cast for candidates representing political parties in a general election for constituency members in the provinces.

Under the Constitution, this quota system is due to come to an end in 2023 and there have been calls to extend this quota system further by amending the Constitution. Government has now agreed that the quota system will be extended.

The quota system was put in place to substantially increase the representation of women in Parliament. It was intended to be a temporary device until more women are able to be directly elected into Parliament. For example, Rwanda first introduced a quota system for women and the outcome of their most recent elections indicated that many more women stood for election to Parliament and now women occupy some 64 percent of the seats in the lower house.

However, women still face multiple barriers in standing for election to Parliament in Zimbabwe. Patriarchy, socio-economic factors, male perceptions of women's family role, male prejudices about female political participation, reluctance by political parties to ensure that they field reasonable numbers of female candidates, and the aggressive nature of political competition within Zimbabwean combine to prevent many qualified and motivated women from standing for Parliament. There is need to change the mindset that discourages females from participating as electoral candidates and political parties should lead this process by encouraging more women to stand for election. Until this takes place, it is justifiable to retain the quota system.

Local government elections

As with parliamentary elections, a candidate must be at least 21 to stand for election to a local council. (Section 119 of the Electoral Act). It is recommended that the minimum age should be set at 18.