

CIVIC EDUCATION HANDBOOK: LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

*A Practical Guide for Residents,
Communities, and Local Government*

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1. Introduction

Civic education empowers citizens to understand their rights, responsibilities, and roles in society. It strengthens democracy, encourages community participation, and enables individuals to engage in decision-making that shapes their towns and cities. This handbook focuses specifically on Local Government Elections, guiding citizens on how to vote, participate, and contribute to community governance.

2. Understanding Civic Responsibility

Civic responsibility involves active participation in the democratic process and community life. Examples include:

- Voting in elections
- Following laws and by-laws
- Serving on committees or in community programmes
- Holding leaders accountable

Civic responsibility ensures that communities are well-governed and that citizens' voices are heard in local decision-making.

3. Foundations of Democracy

Democracy is based on principles of:

- **Equality** – Every citizen has equal rights and opportunities
- **Participation** – Citizens actively contribute to governance
- **Transparency** – Government actions are open and accountable
- **Rule of Law** – Laws apply equally to all
- **Accountability** – Leaders answer for their decisions

Active citizen engagement is essential to strengthen democratic practices at the local level.

4. The Constitution and Rule of Law

The Constitution is Fiji's supreme law. It ensures:

- Protection of citizens' rights
- Equal application of laws
- Legal frameworks guiding local and national governance

The rule of law guarantees that all individuals, including elected officials, are accountable under the law.

5. National Government Structures

Fiji's government operates through three branches:

5.1 Legislative (Parliament)

- Makes laws
- Approves budgets
- Oversees the Executive

5.2 Executive (Prime Minister, Cabinet, Civil Service)

- Implements laws
- Provides services including oversight of local government

5.3 Judiciary (Courts)

- Interprets laws
- Ensures government actions comply with the Constitution

The three branches work together to uphold democracy, balance power, and protect citizens' rights.

6. Local Government: Roles and Functions

Local Government is the level of government closest to citizens, responsible for services and infrastructure in towns and cities.

6.1 Key Roles

- Provide clean, safe, and liveable communities
- Manage urban development and land use
- Regulate businesses and trading
- Represent community priorities

6.2 Core Functions

- Waste and Environmental Services** – Waste collection, street cleaning, drainage, litter control, beautification, and pollution management.
- Markets Management** – Ensuring fair, safe, and hygienic conditions for vendors and customers.
- Town Planning and Development** – Zoning, subdivisions, land-use planning, and promoting orderly, sustainable development.
- Building Control and Permits** – Ensuring construction safety, standards compliance, and resilience.
- Community Facilities** – Maintaining parks, gardens, recreational areas, cemeteries, halls, and other public amenities.
- By-Laws and Enforcement** – Creating and enforcing local rules (e.g., noise control, waste disposal, markets, traffic, bus stands, street numbering, etc.).

Local Government also promotes **public participation**, supports **youth and cultural initiatives**, and works alongside national agencies to improve services and development outcomes.

6.3 Councillors and Their Role

Councillors are the elected representatives who guide the vision, priorities, and decisions of the Municipal Council. They ensure that local government serves the needs of the community in an accountable and transparent manner.

6.4 Who Are Councillors?

Councillors are elected during Local Government Elections to represent the residents of their ward. They work collectively to make decisions that impact service delivery, local development, and municipal governance.

6.5 Core Responsibilities of Councillors

1. Representing the Community

- Act as the voice of the residents.
- Bring local concerns and priorities to the Council.
- Ensure decisions reflect community needs and fairness.

2. Setting Municipal Policies and By-Laws

- Develop and approve policies and by-laws that guide how services are delivered.
- Ensure laws promote safety, good governance, and sustainable development.

3. Overseeing Municipal Services

Councillors do **not** carry out operations themselves but ensure that the Council delivers essential services effectively, including:

- Waste collection and sanitation
- Drainage and roads maintenance
- Markets and bus stands
- Public parks, streetlights, and facilities

They monitor performance and hold the Council accountable.

4. Approving Municipal Budgets

- Review and approve the annual municipal budget.
- Ensure responsible, transparent, and lawful use of public funds.

5. Strategic Planning and Local Development

- Guide long-term plans for infrastructure, zoning, and investments.
- Promote economic growth and environmental resilience.

6. Upholding Good Governance

Councillors must:

- Demonstrate integrity and impartiality
- Avoid conflicts of interest
- Make decisions collectively, not individually
- Act in the public interest at all times

6.6 What Councillors Cannot Do

To maintain ethical and professional governance, Councillors:

- **Do not** manage day-to-day operations of the municipality
- **Cannot** direct municipal staff (this is the CEO's responsibility)
- **Do not** make decisions alone
- **Cannot** use their position for personal or political gain

6.7 How Councillors Work

Councillors carry out their role through:

- **Council meetings** (where decisions are made)
- **Committees** (e.g., planning, finance, environment)
- **Public consultations**
- **Community engagement** activities

They work with the Mayor/Chairperson, CEO, and staff to ensure high-quality service delivery.

6.8 Why Councillors Matter

Councillors directly influence:

- Cleanliness and order in towns and cities
- Quality and reliability of services
- Local infrastructure development
- Business and market environments
- Community wellbeing and safety

Good Councillors help build strong, vibrant, and sustainable communities.

7. Local Government Elections and Voting

Local Government Elections allow citizens to choose councilors who represent their wards and municipalities.

7.1 Voter Eligibility

- Registered on the National Register of Voters
- Resident of the ward for at least 3 months

7.2 Candidate Eligibility

- Fijian citizen only
- Registered on the Local Government voter list
- Nominated from the ward where they reside
- Lived in the municipality for at least one year
- Not an undischarged bankrupt, not a current or recent Electoral Commission member, not an MP or holding certain public offices
- No recent serious criminal convictions

7.3 Political Party Nominations

- Can nominate up to the total number of seats in a ward
- Must comply with all election laws

7.4 Inclusion of iTaukei Villages -Section 125 of Local Government Act

- Certain iTaukei villages within municipal boundaries or within 2 km of the boundary are included to allow residents to vote in local government elections and access municipal services.
- **No Change to Customary Status**
 - Villages remain Native Reserves under the iTaukei Land Trust Act and iTaukei Affairs Act.
 - Customary land ownership, village boundaries, and traditional leadership (Turaga ni Koro) are unaffected.
 - There is no conversion to town land.
- **Municipal Services**
 - Councils may provide services such as waste collection, sanitation, and drainage, and enforce minimum building standards with approval from the iTaukei Affairs Board.
 - Broader town planning or zoning rules do not automatically apply to customary land.
- **Service Fees, Not Rates**
 - Any charges are service fees, not municipal rates.

- Waste collection fees are currently subsidized by the Government, so councils cannot charge separately.
- **Electoral Participation**
 - Residents of incorporated villages can vote in local government elections within their designated wards.
 - This inclusion is administrative only and does not affect the legal or customary status of the village.

7.5 Voting Process

- Free, fair, and secret ballot
- Observers may monitor polling to ensure transparency

8. Rights and Freedoms of Citizens

Citizens have rights that protect participation in local governance:

- **Civil Rights:** Freedom from discrimination, safety, speech, expression, religion, and privacy
- **Political Rights:** Right to vote, join political parties, and participate safely in politics
- **Economic Rights:** Work, fair conditions, and equal pay
- **Social Rights:** Education, healthcare, food, water, housing, and protection for vulnerable groups
- **Cultural Rights:** Practice culture, language, customs, and traditions

9. Duties and Responsibilities of Citizens

Citizens must actively contribute to society:

- **Respect others' rights and diversity**
- **Obey laws and by-laws**
- **Vote and participate in community programs**
- **Protect the environment**
- **Engage in local development and disaster preparedness**

10. Public Participation in Governance

Citizens can influence local decisions through:

- Policy consultations
- Town planning and development meetings
- Public hearings
- Written submissions and feedback

Active participation ensures decisions reflect community needs and improves accountability.

11. Accountability and Transparency in Local Government

Transparency and accountability ensure responsible governance. Mechanisms include:

- **Council Committees** – Review budgets and plans
- **Audits** – Auditor-General reports on municipal finances
- **Monitoring** – Ministry of Local Government oversight

Anti-Corruption Measures:

- Codes of Conduct for Councillors council staff

- Whistleblower channels
- Transparent procurement and contracting

Citizen Role:

- Report misuse of resources or corruption
- Attend meetings and consultations
- Monitor local government service delivery

12. Conclusion

Civic education and participation in local government elections strengthen democracy, ensure accountable governance, and improve community wellbeing. Citizens empowered with knowledge can actively shape the future of their towns and cities.

13. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. Who can vote in Local Government Elections?
 - Fiji Citizens registered on the National Register of Voters and residing in the ward for at least 3 months.
 - Being on the National Register does not automatically allow voting in every ward; you must reside in the specific ward for local eligibility.
2. How do I register to vote in Local Government Elections?
 - Registration will be easier if you are on the National Register of Voters.
 - If you recently moved, ensure your address is updated with the Electoral Commission.
 - There will a voter registration drive by the Fijian Elections Office.
3. How does Section 125 affect voting rights?
 - Villages included under Section 125 are incorporated administratively into municipal wards.
 - This allows residents of these villages to vote in local government elections, without affecting their customary or land rights.
4. Does Section 125 change village land ownership or governance?
 - No. Customary land, village boundaries, and traditional leadership (Turaga ni Koro) remain unchanged.
 - Municipal services and minimum building standards apply only as per the legal provisions, after consultation with the iTaukei Affairs Board.
5. Can councils charge municipal rates to incorporated villages?
 - No. Only service fees may be charged, and currently waste services are subsidized by the Government.
6. Who can be a candidate for municipal council?

Must meet eligibility requirements such as:

 - Be a Fijian citizen only.
 - Be registered on the Local Government Register of Voters.
 - Be nominated from the ward within the municipality where they are registered.
 - Have resided in the municipality for at least one year before nomination.
 - Not be an undischarged bankrupt, an Electoral Commission member (current or within past 4 years), a Member of Parliament, or hold certain public offices.
 - Not have recent criminal convictions (within the past 8 years for serious offences or election-related offences).

7. How are candidates nominated?
 - Candidates may be nominated by a registered political party or as independent candidates.
 - A political party may nominate up to the total number of seats available in the ward.
 - For a by-election, a party may nominate up to the number of vacant seats.
 - Nominations must comply with election laws, such as Electoral Act, Electoral (Local Government Elections) Regulations 2025, including submission of completed forms and supporting documents by the deadline set by the Electoral Commission.
8. Can I vote if I am temporarily away from my ward on election day?
 - Voting is based on your ward of residence, not where you are temporarily.
 - If you are away from your ward on the day of election you may not be able to vote, unless otherwise provided for in the Electoral (Local Government Elections) Regulations 2025.
9. How many votes can I cast in my ward?
 - The number of votes depends on the number of council seats in your ward.
 - For example, if your ward has three council seats, you may be allowed to vote for up to three candidates.
 - Voting is secret and free, ensuring that you can select candidates without coercion.
10. What are my rights and responsibilities as a voter?
 - **Rights:** Vote freely, access information, and report violations.
 - **Responsibilities:** Verify registration, vote honestly, respect process, and avoid coercion.
11. How can residents participate without being a candidate?
 - Attend town hall/ward meetings and consultations
 - Submit feedback on council services
12. Why are Local Government Elections important?
 - They decide who manages municipal services and local development.
 - Elections ensure accountability and allow citizens to influence decisions affecting daily life.
13. How do I stay informed about elections?
 - Check official Electoral Commission announcements.
 - Check the Ministry of Local Government website and social media for updates.
 - Visit your municipal council office for ward-specific information.
 - Follow updates via government websites, local radio, newspapers, and community boards.
 - Attend public awareness sessions or town halls organized before elections.
14. What is a Councillor?
 - A Councillor is an elected representative who serves on a Municipal Council. They make decisions about services, development, and policies that affect the town or city.
15. How are Councillors chosen?
 - Councillors are elected during Local Government Elections. Voters in each ward choose the candidates who will represent them on the Council.
16. What do Councillors actually do?
 - Represent community concerns
 - Set policies and by-laws
 - Approve the municipal budget
 - Oversee municipal services
 - Guide development and planning
 - Ensure transparency and accountability

- They do not manage day-to-day municipal operations.
17. What is the difference between a Councillor and the Mayor?
- Councillors are members of the Council.
 - The Mayor is selected from among the Councillors to lead meetings, represent the municipality, and provide leadership.
 - Both have equal voting powers.
18. Can Councillors give orders to municipal staff?
- No. Councillors cannot direct municipal workers or interfere in operations. This is the responsibility of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the management team.
19. Are Councillors paid?
- Yes. Councillors receive an allowance as determined by law. The amount reflects their responsibilities and time commitment.
20. How long is a Councillor's term?
- A Councillor's term is determined under the Local Government Elections framework, which is three years, unless legislation specifies otherwise.
21. Can a Councillor be removed?
- Yes. A Councillor may be removed if they:
- Are convicted of certain offences
 - Become ineligible under the law
 - Violate code of conduct requirements
 - Resign or otherwise vacate their seat
 - The process is governed by Local Government Act.
22. Can a Councillor make decisions alone?
- No. All decisions are made collectively in Council or committee meetings. Individual Councillors cannot impose decisions or act on behalf of the Council without approval.
23. How can citizens contact their Councillor?
- Most Councils provide:
 - Town Hall/Ward/residents meetings
 - Community forums
 - Council office contact details
 - Public consultation notices
 - Citizens can also approach Councillors during public events or through official channels.
24. What skills should a good Councillor have?
- Good Councillors demonstrate:
- Integrity
 - Good judgement
 - Communication skills
 - Understanding of community needs
 - Commitment to public service
 - Ability to work collaboratively
25. Can Councillors be involved in business activities?
- Yes, but they must declare any conflicts of interest and must not use their position for personal gain.

26. What happens if a Councillor does not attend meetings?
- Councillors who miss a required number of meetings without valid reasons may have their seat declared vacant under the law.
27. Why are Councillors important?
- Councillors ensure that local services run well, public funds are used responsibly, and decisions reflect the people's needs. They help build safe, clean, and prosperous communities.