

Chapter 7

Citizen Roles in American Democracy

Lesson 1

Roles of Citizens



Key Terms

civility
civil rights
common good
commonwealth
empowerment
enlightened self-interest
greatest happiness of the
greatest number
melting pot

nation of nations
naturalized citizen
orthodoxy
political action
political rights
resident alien
social action
spirit of association

What You Will Learn to Do

- Determine your role as a citizen of a constitutional democracy

Linked Core Abilities

- Communicate using verbal, non-verbal, visual, and written techniques
- Do your share as a good citizen in your school, community, country, and the world

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Explain the relationship between self-interest and the common good
- Describe the differences between citizens and resident aliens
- Explain how citizenship in a constitutional democracy differs from citizenship in a totalitarian state
- Explain how citizens can exercise their rights and responsibilities in a constitutional democracy
- Define key words contained in this lesson

Chapter 7

Introduction

In this lesson you examine the American citizenship and its relationship to the natural rights philosophy, republicanism, and constitutional democracy. You examine the characteristics of effective citizenship, explore the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and determine the qualities citizens need to develop to become effective citizens in our society.

Citizenship

From its beginnings, America was strongly influenced by the ideals of classical republicanism. The early American colonies of the seventeenth century were political communities in which civic virtue could be exercised. Many of these colonies were called **commonwealths**, a word that meant something like a republic, that is, self-governing communities of equals whose members were expected to help serve the good of all. In the Mayflower Compact, the Pilgrims declared their intent to “covenant and combine themselves together into a civil body politic.”

The American Founders admired the civic virtue of the ancients and the classical models of republican government. They also were influenced by the natural rights philosophy of John Locke (see Figure 7.1.1). The natural rights philosophy conflicted in several important ways with the ideals of classical republicanism. Instead of the **common good**, it stressed the importance of individual rights and self interest.

Society and government, according to Locke, were established to protect the rights of the individual. Human communities did not exist for their own sake, but rather to protect the individuals belonging to them, each of whom is free to pursue his or her

own interest so long as it does not interfere with the interests of others.

The Founders were influenced by both these theories of government. They had to compromise in adapting this intellectual inheritance to the conditions in America. They established a limited government of checks and balances that allowed civic virtue to flourish, but also could prevent abuses of self-interest when it did not.

The Founders realized that the classical republicanism of the ancient city states could not be easily adapted to a country as large and diverse as Amer-

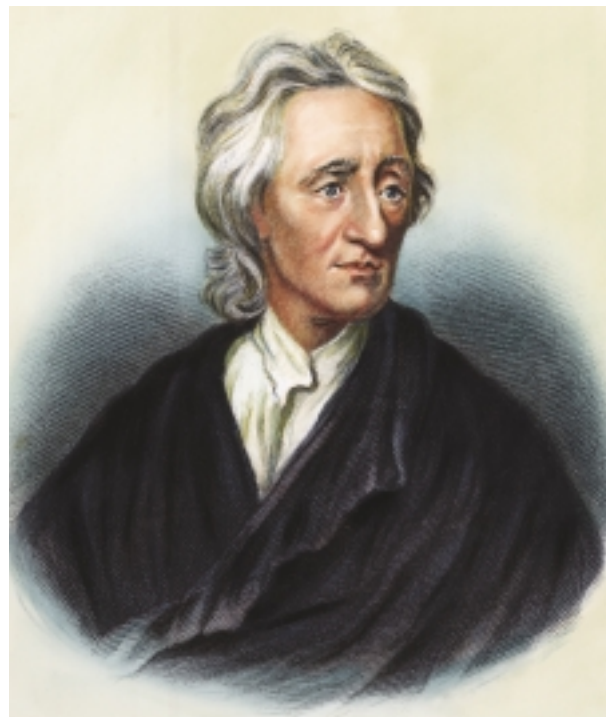
Key Note Term

commonwealth—similar to a republic; that is, self-governing communities of equals whose members were expected to help serve the good of all

common good—the obligation of each citizen to serve the good of the whole community

Figure 7.1.1: John Locke.

Courtesy of Bettmann/
Corbis Images.



ica. They also recognized that republican self government required a greater measure of civic virtue than did other forms of government. Civic virtue, therefore, was essential. But how was civic virtue to be promoted in this new experiment in republican self-government?

In general, the Founders looked to two solutions: religion and education. The Founders themselves had different religious beliefs. Many were wary of the dangers that religious **orthodoxy** posed to individual freedom. At the same time, however, they acknowledged the value of organized religion in promoting virtue. Virtuous behavior, which enabled people to control their passions, would produce upright, responsible citizens.

The second solution that the Founders recognized was the importance of education to good citizenship. For the American experiment in republican self-government to succeed, each of its citizens had to be schooled in the ideals and principles upon which that experiment was based.

Formal schooling, together with a free press, became a priority in the early years of the new republic. Public or “common schools” developed rapidly to prepare Americans not only as workers in a growing economy, but also as citizens committed to the principles of self-government. As nineteenth-century American educator Horace Mann observed, “schoolhouses are the republican line of fortifications.”

Tocqueville and Good Citizenship

Alexis de Tocqueville was a young French aristocrat who visited the United States in the 1830s, at a time when the spirit of Jacksonian democracy was helping to bring about greater equality and more widespread participation in the nation’s political life. He was curious about and impressed by America’s experiment in democracy and how well it worked. After finishing his tour of the United States, he recorded his impressions in a very influential book, *Democracy in America*.

Tocqueville found much to admire and criticize as he traveled the country. Though impressed by the equality of opportunity in the American democracy, he wondered how a society so devoted to materialism and the pursuit of individual self-interest could produce the civic spirit needed for self government. He believed the answer was to be found in the qualities he admired in American democracy: traditions of local self-government and habits of free association.

The New England townships were tiny models of classical republicanism, where the habits of citizenship were developed. Tocqueville observed that a citizen of one of these American towns takes part in every affair of the place; he practices the act of government in the small sphere within his reach . . . and collects clear practical notions on the nature of his duties and the extent of his rights.

This tradition of local self-government also encouraged voluntary association. Nothing so impressed de Tocqueville about America as the fondness American citizens had for banding together to address problems of common interest. While Europeans would prefer to let government address all public problems, Americans preferred to do it themselves, as citizens. This **spirit of association** remains a distinctive characteristic of American society today.

Key Note Term

orthodoxy—a belief or orientation agreeing with conventional standards

Key Note Term

spirit of association—the fondness American citizens had for banding together to address problems of common interest

Town meeting in Laguna Niguel, California

How does the tradition of local self-government embody Tocqueville's concept of "spirit of association"?

Courtesy of F.P.G. International, Spencer Grant.



Key Note Term

political rights—all of the implicit (constitutionally guaranteed) and implied (by natural laws) rights of a citizen in a free society

Such traditions of local self-government and habits of free association, Tocqueville concluded, provided a way for teaching citizenship in the American democracy. He wrote, "The most powerful and perhaps the only means that we still possess of interesting men in the welfare of their country is to make them participate in the government. At the present time civic zeal seems to be inseparable from the exercise of **political rights**."

Similar to the Founders, Tocqueville realized that the civic virtue of the ancients was not practical in the United States. Democratic citizenship, he believed, would have to depend upon something else. He did not believe there had to be a contradiction between self-interest and civic-mindedness. In a land of equality and widespread participation in political life, each citizen could see a connection between self-interest and the common good. American citizens are willing to devote themselves to public ends, Tocqueville believed, because they realize that the fulfillment of their private ambitions depends in large part on the success of the democratic society. Good citizenship for Tocqueville, therefore, was nothing other than enlightened self-interest.

Points to Ponder

1. Some people claim that the best way to achieve the common good is for each person to work for his or her self-interest. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. The common good is a principle originally practiced in relatively small and homogeneous societies. Do you think there is a common good in a nation as large and diverse as the United States? Why or why not?
3. What should voters do if their representative votes for a bill that is good for the entire country but damages their particular interest?

Defining Who Is a Citizen

In our country, anyone who is born in the United States, or is born to citizens of the United States, is a citizen. The term used for non-citizens who legally reside in the United States is **resident aliens**. By satisfying certain requirements, resident aliens may become **naturalized citizens**. Both resident aliens and citizens who live in the United States must obey the laws of the United States. They also receive the protection of those laws. Resident aliens are guaranteed most of the rights possessed by citizens. If they are tried in a court of law, for example, they are guaranteed the same rights to due process that are provided for citizens in the Constitution.

There are two important rights, however, that citizens have and aliens do not: the rights to vote and to hold public office. Possessing these rights, many people have argued, is what distinguishes the citizen from the non-citizen. Some people also argue that in possessing these important rights, citizens also have special responsibilities toward their country that non-citizens do not.

Evaluating, Taking, and Defending a Position on Extending the Right to Vote for School Board Members to Resident Aliens

Your class should be divided into four groups—two for the issue and two against. Each group should choose a spokesperson to present the group's views to the class. Groups on the same side of the issue should compare ideas and not make duplicate points. After the four presentations are made the class should vote on whether to pass the proposed legislation.

In some communities in our nation, there is growing interest in extending to resident aliens the right to vote in local school board elections. Proponents of such a law argue that resident aliens pay state and local taxes to support public education and that all taxpayers should have a representative voice influencing policies that directly affect them or their children. In addition, resident aliens have met all the criteria for being in this country legally. Opponents argue that because resident aliens are not citizens, they lack a long-term interest in the welfare of the community, and granting them voting rights in school board elections blurs the distinction between rights of citizens and non-citizens. It is the first step, they argue, in the demise of meaningful citizenship.

1. Do you think that resident aliens who must pay taxes and obey the government's laws should have a voice in local government by being permitted to vote? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that resident aliens should have the right to serve as elected members of local government?
3. What political obligations or responsibilities should resident aliens or non-citizens have? Explain your position.

American Citizenship and Our Diverse Society

From its beginnings, America has been what the poet Walt Whitman called a “**nation of nations**,” populated by millions of immigrants of different races, religions, languages, and ethnic backgrounds.

Key Note Term

resident alien—
a foreign-born
inhabitant

naturalized citizen—
an individual who gains
full citizenship in a
country other than that
of their birth

Key Note Term

nation of nations—
America is peopled by
millions of immigrants
of different races, reli-
gions, languages, and
ethnic backgrounds

How has the diversity of new citizens enriched America?

Courtesy of AP/Wide World Photos.



One of the greatest challenges to the American experiment in republican government has been to form a common bond out of such diversity. That common bond is provided by the ideal of American citizenship and a commitment to the Constitution and its ideals and principles. Though they could not foresee how diverse the immigration to this country would become, many of the Founders recognized that the new country would continue to take in people of different origins. For them, becoming American was primarily a matter of allegiance to the political ideals of the new land. In the early nineteenth century, Congress established five years as the minimum time required for immigrants to learn these ideals and to become naturalized citizens.

As George Washington told the members of the Touro Synagogue of Newport, Rhode Island, in 1790,

Happily, the government of the United States that gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it their effectual support.

For Washington and other Founders, good citizenship meant responsible conduct and acceptance of the nation's political principles.

For much of our nation's history, becoming an American meant something more. It represented a fresh start, a new beginning, leaving the injustices and prejudices of the old world behind.

“What then is this American, this new man?” asked Crèvecoeur, the eighteenth-century French immigrant to America. Americans, Crèvecoeur believed, had left the values and lifestyles of their different origins behind to become “a new race of men.” Perhaps the most famous metaphor for this ideal of Americanization was expressed

by Israel Zangwell in his 1908 play, *The Melting Pot*, “America is God’s crucible, the great **melting pot** where all the races of men are melting and reforming.”

Has America been a melting pot? Not entirely. Throughout our history the assimilation of different people into a new American identity has been only partially successful in achieving the classical republican ideal of a common culture. Many immigrants to the new land were reluctant to give up the heritages they brought with them. They were proud of both their “Americaness” and the cultural inheritance they carried to the New World.

As a nation of immigrants we have come to appreciate the benefits of the great mixture



How can you apply the phrase “to give to bigotry no sanction” to your daily life?

Courtesy of ERG. International.

Key Note Term

melting pot—a term used to describe a society made up of diverse cultures or races which have merged or “melted” into each other



How can America be a “nation of nations” and still have a common civic culture?

Courtesy of AP/Wide World Photos.

of heritages transplanted to America. They have enriched American life in many ways. The diversity of the nation's cultural inheritance also has placed a heavy responsibility on our ideal of citizenship. The unity of American society depends very largely on the ability of that ideal—the civic culture all Americans, whatever their particular origins, share in common—to hold us together as a nation.

Throughout our history there has been tension between the diversity of backgrounds and the common ideal of citizenship. The need to balance unity with diversity remains a challenging goal for your generation.

Evaluating the Relationship between the Ideals of Classical Republicanism and Contemporary American Citizenship

Some observers of American society today are worried about the future health of America's experiment in self-government. They believe we have inherited too much of the self-interest of the natural rights philosophy and not enough of the public spirit of classical republicanism. These critics see contemporary America as a fragmented society, in which individuals are preoccupied with the pursuit of economic self-interest. Some feel that government is disconnected from people's lives. Americans see fewer opportunities to exercise their responsibilities as citizens than they did in the past.

Some critics believe a return to the principles of classical republicanism is the solution to this problem. The nation's schools, they say, should improve civics education, and our democratic institutions must create new ways to involve citizens in public affairs. Work in small groups to develop positions on the following questions. Be prepared to present and defend your positions before the class.

1. Do you think the observations in the exercise about contemporary American society are accurate? Explain your position.
2. Do you think the classical republican sense of community is possible in American society today? What forces work against it? What resources might encourage its development?
3. What ways can you think of to involve citizens in public affairs? What reforms would you propose to the political process? To the Constitution? To our education system?

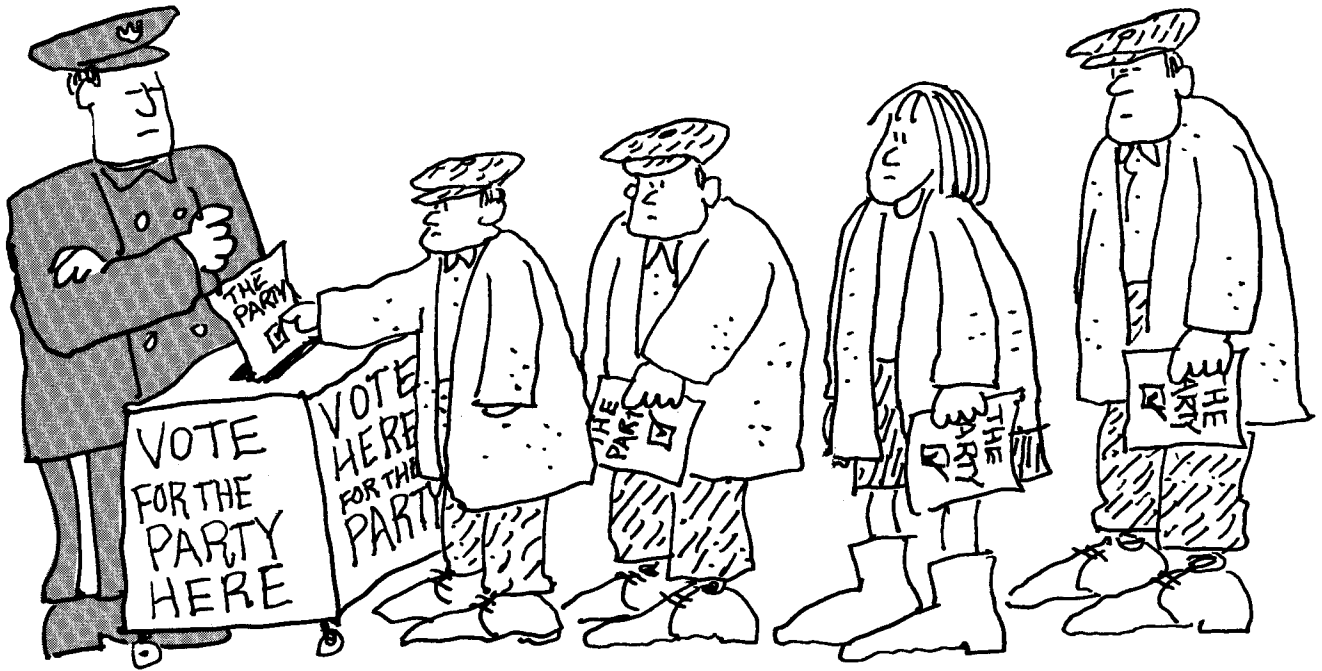
How Citizens in a Constitutional Democracy Differ from Those in a Dictatorship or Totalitarian State

Citizenship has meant different things at different times in history and in different places. Totalitarian states and dictatorships also refer to those they govern as citizens—though they may lack the rights and responsibilities associated with American citizenship. Your role as a citizen of a constitutional democracy differs in fundamental respects from the role of a citizen living under unlimited or arbitrary government. While passive obedience and unquestioning loyalty are demanded by unlimited regimes, the citizen of a constitutional democracy is expected to be a critical and participating member of the political community. Citizens of constitutional democracies should have a reasoned loyalty and obedience to law not based on unquestioning deference to authority.

Criticism of one's government may carry with it a right, and perhaps even a duty, to disobey laws you believe are unjust laws. The **civil rights** movement provides a contemporary example.

Key Note Term

civil rights—fundamental rights belonging to every member of a society; these rights protect us in our private lives from the arbitrary and unfair actions of government



Is it possible to generate reasoned loyalty and obedience in a system that demands unquestioned deference to authority? Why?

More Points to Ponder

1. Is civil disobedience ever a justified form of political participation? Give two examples to support your position.
2. Under what circumstances do you think a citizen in a representative democracy has a right to violate a law? Explain your position.
3. What would be a proper response of the government to someone, who for reasons of conscience, breaks a law?
4. Do you agree with Thomas Jefferson that “a little rebellion” now and then is healthy for the political system? If so, what form might a little rebellion take?

Rights and Responsibilities of Citizens

As you consider the rights of citizenship, it is important to distinguish between civil rights and **political rights**.

- **Civil rights protect us in our private lives from the arbitrary and unfair actions of government.**
- **Political rights allow us to participate in our own governance.**

Because non-citizens living in this country are granted the same civil rights that citizens enjoy, political rights are to a large extent what define our status as citizens. You must be a citizen to exercise the rights to vote or serve in government.

Key Note Term

political rights—all of the implicit (constitutionally guaranteed) and implied (by natural laws) rights of a citizen in a free society

Many of our rights suggest a corresponding obligation. In exercising our rights as individuals, we must respect other citizens' use of those same rights. Some obligations are legal, imposed by laws commonly agreed upon. For example, we have an obligation to obey the law, including those laws that require us to pay taxes, serve on juries, and meet the other responsibilities that help government operate.

Most of us would agree that we also have certain moral obligations as citizens. For example, some argue we have a duty, as well as a right, to vote. Even though the law no longer requires American citizens to perform military service, many Americans believe it is a duty to defend one's country or to assist it in other emergencies.

What Do You Think?

1. How does Voltaire's statement "I may detest what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it," relate to the responsibilities of citizenship?
2. Why is it important to speak up for the rights of others even if your own rights are not endangered?

Does U.S. citizenship carry with it an obligation to perform national service? Explain.

Courtesy of AP/Wide World Photos.



Being Effective Citizens

The natural rights philosophy and classical republicanism provide different answers to this question. The natural rights philosophy emphasizes the elective nature of citizenship. Each citizen has a choice whether to remain a citizen of the United States. Each citizen possesses certain natural rights and it is the primary purpose of government to protect these rights. In choosing a government to protect these rights, citizens follow their self-interest in making sure that government does its job.

We pay attention to how well the people we choose to govern us are doing their jobs. We participate as citizens, therefore, to ensure that government complies with its contractual obligations to us as individuals.

The classical republican philosophy, on the other hand, emphasizes our obligation to the society into which we were born or naturalized. Classical republicanism emphasizes the common good and the obligation of each citizen to serve the good of the whole community. Citizenship requires that we put this general good before our own self-interest, especially when the two conflict.

In practice, of course, the American civic tradition includes both concepts of citizenship. One of the enduring challenges you face as a citizen is sorting out for yourself the conflict between them in many different situations.

Reconciling the Common Good and Individual Self-Interest

Your class will be divided into small groups to discuss the issue of conflict between the good of the whole society and individual self-interest. Discuss and take a position on the questions at the end of the exercise. Be prepared to share your opinions with the class.

The conflict between the common good and self-interest is not the only problem you face as citizens. Sometimes it is difficult to determine what the common good or your own self-interest actually is. In some situations the common good may be quite clear as, for example, the need to protect the community from criminals, foreign enemies, and air pollution. In other situations, however, citizens strongly disagree about what the common good is and what policies are needed to serve it. For example, some would argue that laws strictly limiting human activity in environmentally sensitive areas are necessary to preserve the future well-being of our natural resources. Others claim that such restrictive policies can endanger the economy and may violate property rights.

It is not always easy to know how our individual interests are served. What may appear to be self interest in the short-run might not be in our best long-term interest. Some aspects of this problem are raised in the following questions.

1. Is the common good the greatest happiness of the greatest number? If so, what does that phrase mean? Should the measurement of the greatest number be a minimum of 51 percent or should the percentage be higher? What would be the danger in determining the common good according to this principle?
2. Is the common good the goals that all people in the nation share? If so, how do we find out what those goals are?
3. If you find that you and your fellow citizens cannot agree on what the common good is, should you just pursue your own interests and forget about what is good for all? What alternatives might there be?

However defined, the effective use of rights and responsibilities in a constitutional democracy requires certain beliefs, commitments, and skills.

Civic Values

These express our most fundamental beliefs about the purpose of government within a society and the goals that we expect a government to achieve. They are ideals expressed or implied in some of the nation's founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution. They include such ideals as the dignity of the individual, equality, and justice. Though we as citizens might disagree about the meaning and relative importance of each specific value, we share a broad agreement about their significance in defining the ultimate ends of the society we have established.

Civic Principles

These can be defined as those principles of government that best enable society to realize its civic values. Included among these essential principles would be the rule of law, popular sovereignty, and freedom of expression. Such principles define our commitment to constitutional government and democracy.

Civic Skills

These describe the abilities we need as individuals to help realize civic values and make civic principles work. To be effective citizens we must have knowledge of our government's history and how it operates. We also must develop our intellectual abilities: analytical skills for the solving of problems, and communication skills to express our opinions and understand the opinions of others.

Key Note Term

civility—suggests the decency and integrity that are essential to a constitutional democracy

Civic Dispositions

Effective citizenship is not possible if we do not adopt those dispositions or qualities of behavior that sustain a civic culture in a free society. Such a culture depends on tolerance, fairness, a respect for the opinions of others, and a commitment to truth. The word **civility** suggests the decency and integrity that are essential to a constitutional democracy.



Town meeting in Charlotte, Vermont

How does participation in public affairs “empower” citizens?

Courtesy of AP/Wide World Photos.

Understanding Empowerment

By developing an informed commitment to the values, principles, and dispositions of our civic culture and by acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to play a role in it, we become “empowered” as citizens. **Empowerment** is a word we sometimes use today to describe the ability to “make one’s voice heard” in public affairs. With empowerment, each of us knows that we have the potential to be effective as citizens when the need and opportunity arise.

You have more empowerment than you may realize. In 1991, at the time our country was celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights, a group of high school students in North Carolina discovered that their state had never ratified the Twenty-fourth Amendment, which abolished the poll tax and other taxes that had been used to discriminate against African Americans.

As a project, the students investigated the legal requirements for ratification. They then petitioned the North Carolina state legislature to formally ratify the amendment. The students visited the state capitol and lobbied their legislators. After the legislature complied, the students carried the official notice of ratification to Washington, D.C., where they presented it to the Archivist of the United States. Through this school project, the students demonstrated their empowerment as citizens.

Becoming Effective Citizens

Citizenship in a free society is not always easy. Freedom requires us to live as self-reliant individuals, to think for ourselves, to solve our own problems, to cope with uncertainty and change, and to assist and respect others.

Citizens are made, not born. Similar to the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Founders placed great importance on the role of education in preparing each generation for citizenship. Your education will help provide you with the knowledge and skills to function effectively as citizens of a constitutional democracy. Practical experience has been as important as formal schooling in preparing Americans for citizenship. Americans learn the skills of citizenship through the many opportunities to participate in public affairs.

We begin the process of learning to be citizens in early childhood. At home and in the classroom, we begin to think for ourselves, to express our own opinions, and to respect the opinions of others.

Through such activities as student government, school projects, sports, and community and club activities, we begin to acquire the skills of teamwork, organization, and debate. In short, many of the qualities that we need for citizenship begin to develop early in our lives.

Exercising Rights and Responsibilities as Citizens

In dealing with the problems of our communities and the nation, we have different possibilities. We may engage in **social action** or we may engage in **political action**. We may, of course, choose to engage in both. For example, in dealing with the

Key Note Term

empowerment—describes the ability to “make one’s voice heard” in public affairs

Key Note Term

social action—organize other members of the community

political action—an organized attempt to influence the political process, from lobbying legislators to seeking the election (or defeat) or particular candidates



Does citizenship obligate a person to participate in social and political actions? Why?

Courtesy of AP/Wide World Photos, E.P.G. International, Paul Conklin.

problems of crime in the community, we might join a neighborhood watch. Alternatively, we might organize other members of the community to present the problem to the city council in an effort to get more police officers on the streets. The first is an example of social action, the second an example of political action. These two courses of action are not mutually exclusive. We might decide to engage in both at the same time.

One of the issues we must decide as citizens is how a particular problem is most effectively solved. The decision we make depends on our analysis of the problem, our estimate of the possible solutions, and our own values. Making these decisions lies at the heart of the practice of responsible citizenship.

Examining the Responsibilities of Citizenship and Deciding on How They Can Be Fulfilled

In contemporary urban and rural America, violence by and against young people is receiving increased social and political attention, as well as daily coverage on television and in newspapers. Statistically, the incidence of youth violence has not increased during the last decade, the deadliness of it has. More young people carry guns or other weapons and use them as a means of settling disputes or intimidating others.

Conclusion

In previous units you were asked to focus on the history and nature of our legacy as a constitutional democracy. In this lesson you examined what this legacy means for us as individual citizens. You should be able to explain how Americans have viewed citizenship and its rights and responsibilities. You also should be able to distinguish between a citizen and a resident alien. Finally, you should be able to explain the special importance the idea of citizenship has in America as a land of immigrants from many nations.

You also examined the characteristics of citizenship in a constitutional democracy. Citizens sometimes disagree about what their role should be. It is your right in a free society to decide how you want to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. What you have learned in this text and elsewhere about your heritage of constitutional democracy will help you in making this decision. How you conduct yourself as a citizen also will depend on your own interests and abilities.

In the next lesson, you will learn about new citizenship and constitutional issues. This lesson will explore three trends that may impact citizenship in the future: the increasing diversity of American society, the impact of modern technology, and America's growing interdependence with the rest of the world.

Lesson Review

1. What responsibilities, if any, do you as a citizen have to promote sound political and social policies designed to decrease or prevent the problem of violence?
2. What social actions can you, as a citizen of your school and community, become involved in to help prevent the problem?
3. What values and interests do you think are important for you as a citizen to promote in connection with prevention of violence by and against young people?
4. How did the Founders expect to promote civic virtue in a country as large and diverse as the United States?