

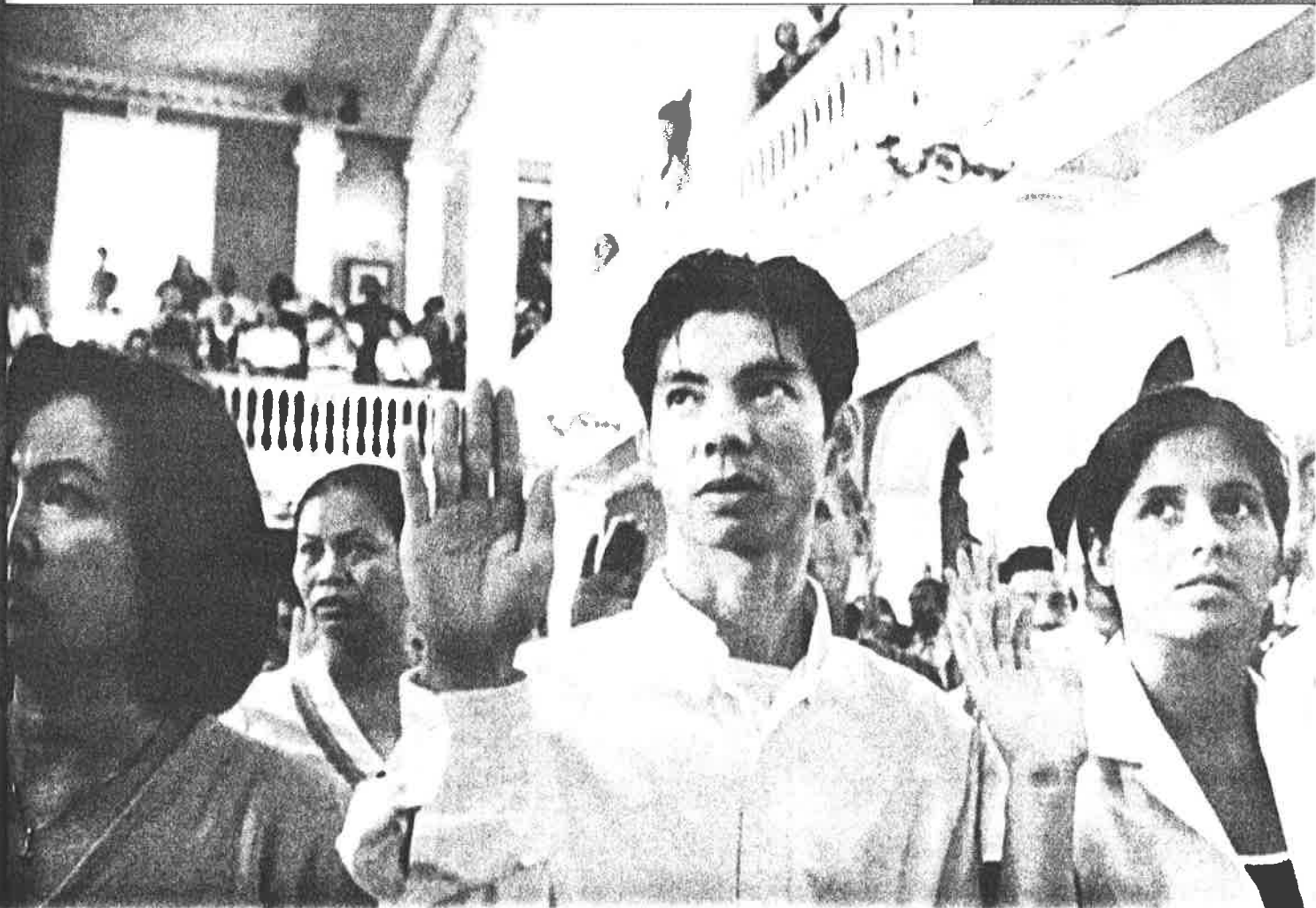
What are the rights and responsibilities of citizenship?

LESSON PURPOSE

In this lesson you will examine the meaning of citizenship and how one becomes a citizen of the United States. You will examine the rights of citizens as well as the responsibilities that accompany our citizenship in this nation. Finally, you will develop positions on what a citizen might do when he or she thinks that a law is unjust.

When you finish this lesson, you should be able to explain the meaning of citizenship and how one becomes a citizen of the United States. You should also be able to explain some of the rights of citizens and the responsibilities that accompany those rights.

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TERMS TO UNDERSTAND



citizen
civic responsibilities
economic rights
legal permanent resident
naturalized citizen
personal rights

personal responsibilities
political rights

What does it mean to be a citizen?

A **citizen** is a person who is a legal member of a self-governing community, such as a nation or state. In the United States, there are no degrees or classes of citizenship. In this country, citizenship does not depend on a person's race, gender, or ethnic origin. Every citizen is a full member of the political community.

A citizen is one person among equals. Each citizen possesses equal rights under the law. In addition, our rights as citizens come with certain responsibilities. It is also important to remember that under our federal system, Americans are citizens of both their state and the United States.

How does a person become a citizen of the United States?

Every person born in the United States is a citizen of this country. A person born in another country to parents who are citizens of the United States is also a citizen of this country.

A **legal permanent resident** is someone who is not a citizen of the United States



What is a citizen? Should some citizens have more rights than others? Why or why not?

but who is legally permitted to live here. Legal permanent residents enjoy most of the rights of citizens and like citizens



Should a person born in the United States automatically become a citizen? Why or why not?

they must obey the laws and pay their taxes. They have the same rights to due process as citizens.

Legal permanent residents are not full members of the political community because there are some rights that are reserved for citizens. Only citizens may vote in national elections, hold public office, or serve on juries.

In most cases, legal permanent residents can become citizens. An adult permanent resident may apply for citizenship after living in the United States legally for five years. Before becoming a citizen, the person must pass a test to show that he or she understands the history and Constitution of the United States. The person must be of good moral character and demonstrate the ability to communicate in English. A person who gets his or her citizenship in this way is a **naturalized citizen**. The minor child of a naturalized citizen becomes a citizen of the United States when the parents do.

What are the rights of citizens?

There are three categories of rights that are important to democracy and to American citizens. These are personal rights, political rights, and economic rights.

Personal rights are those rights that allow a person to do as he or she wishes so long as those actions are consistent with the public order and do not interfere with the rights of others. The following are some personal rights:

- freedom to associate with whomever one pleases
- freedom of conscience and religion
- freedom of expression for creativity
- freedom to have children
- freedom to live where one chooses
- freedom to have privacy
- freedom to travel

Political rights are those rights that allow citizens to participate in the political process. Without these rights, democracy could not exist. The following are political rights:

- due process of law and fair procedures
- equal protection under the law
- freedom to examine the conduct of public officials
- freedom of expression for political purposes
- freedom of political association and assembly
- freedom to seek and hold public office
- freedom to serve on juries
- freedom to vote in free, fair, and regular elections

Economic rights are those rights needed to earn a living and to acquire and transfer property or to produce goods and services. The following are economic rights:

- freedom to acquire, use, and sell or give away property
- freedom to choose one's work
- freedom to enter into lawful contracts
- freedom to establish and operate a business
- freedom to join professional associations and labor unions

It is important to remember that it is reasonable and fair to place limits on most rights; they are not absolute. Most people argue that the only right that cannot be limited is freedom of belief. All other rights can be limited in certain situations. For example, you learned in an earlier lesson that freedom of expression



can be limited if and when it seriously harms or endangers others.

Some rights may be limited when they conflict with other rights or with other important values and interests. For example, the right to own and use property can conflict with our interest in having a safe and healthy environment.

What responsibilities accompany the basic rights of citizens?

With the rights of citizens of the United States come certain responsibilities. Citizens do not always agree on their responsibilities. Some responsibilities that Americans have agreed upon over the years are listed below.

Personal responsibilities are obligations that each person assumes individually. The following are examples of personal responsibilities:

- accepting the consequences of one's actions
- adhering to moral principles
- behaving in a civil manner
- considering the rights and interests of others
- supporting one's family
- taking care of one's self

Civic responsibilities are obligations that each person has to society. The following are examples of civic responsibilities:

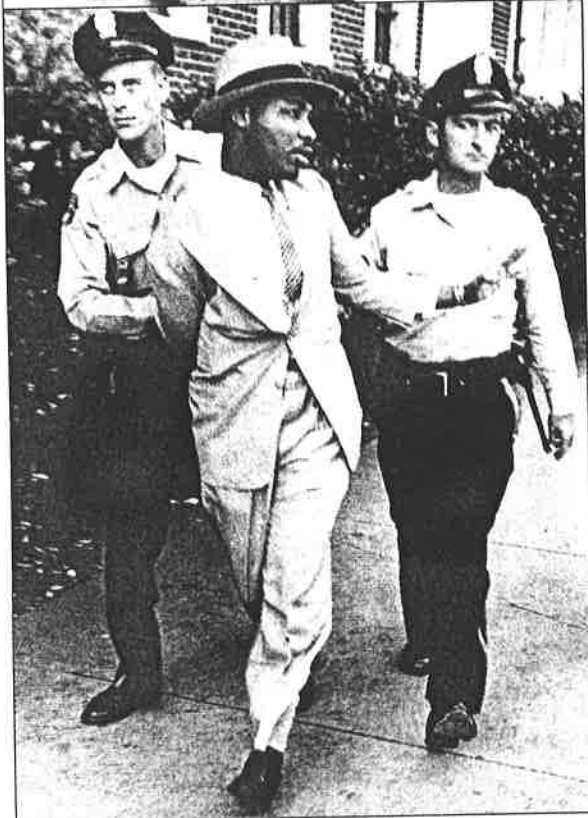
- being informed about public issues
- voting and deciding how to vote
- keeping watch over political



What are some examples of your responsibilities as a citizen of the United States?

- leaders and governmental agencies and taking appropriate action if they do not follow constitutional principles
- obeying the laws
- participating in civic groups
- paying taxes
- respecting the rights of others
- serving as a juror
- serving in the armed forces

Citizens must not only be aware of their rights. They must also learn to use their rights responsibly. Fulfilling personal and civic responsibilities is a necessity in a self-governing, free, and just society.



Why did Henry David Thoreau (above) and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (below) practice civil disobedience? What should a citizen consider before deciding to disobey the law?

Must you obey a law you think is unjust?

When laws or governmental actions conflict with a citizen's views of what is right and wrong, the citizen faces a difficult decision. In our system of government, you have a right to try to have laws changed. There are many ways that you and others can work to change laws that you think are unjust. Until you get them changed, however, you are held responsible for obeying the laws.

Suppose a law requires you to do something you believe is wrong. Must you obey the law? Some people argue that since no government is perfect, a citizen's responsibility to obey the law has limits. In their view, if a law is unjust, the citizen has no responsibility to obey it.

Deciding to disobey a law is a serious step. Disobeying the law has consequences that the citizen must be prepared to accept. Such consequences might include paying fines and even going to jail.

Throughout history, many citizens have accepted the consequences of disobeying the law. In the 1800s the famous American philosopher Henry David Thoreau chose to go to jail rather than pay a tax to support slavery and the Mexican-American War. In the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others chose to go to jail to protest racial segregation laws. During the Vietnam War, many young men burned their draft cards and refused to serve in the armed forces because they believed the war was unjust.



What responsibilities of citizens are portrayed in this picture?

What are your responsibilities as a citizen?

You have learned a great deal about our nation's government from studying this book. You also have learned about some of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. You and all citizens will be faced with difficult decisions about your role in a democratic society.

What commitment are you willing to make to the basic principles of our government? How will you decide which of your rights, desires, or interests may have to take second place to your responsibility to the common good? It is your responsibility as a citizen to make these difficult decisions.

LESSON REVIEW

- 1 What does the term citizen mean?
- 2 Who is a citizen of the United States?
- 3 How can noncitizens acquire citizenship in this country?
- 4 What are the personal, political, and economic rights of citizens?
- 5 What responsibilities accompany our basic rights?
- 6 What are some consequences to consider when deciding whether to challenge a law that you think is unjust?

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Write a short essay in which you describe the qualities of good citizens in a constitutional democracy. Explain why you think these qualities are necessary.
- 2 Debate the following questions with groups of three or four students.

What should a person do when he or she thinks that a law is unjust? Give examples to support your opinion.

Suppose you cannot agree on what is in the common good. Should you pursue your own interests or still try to consider the interests of others? Explain your answer and provide examples.
- 3 Learn more about resident aliens in the United States. Use the Internet to do some research. In what regions of the country do a majority of resident aliens live? What motivates resident aliens to want to live in the United States?
- 4 Learn more about individuals who have become naturalized citizens of the United States. Here is a list of people you might want to research in your library or on the Internet.
 - Madeleine Albright
 - Albert Einstein
 - Marcus Garvey
 - Andrew S. Grove
 - Henry Kissinger
 - Chien-Shiung Wu
- 5 Develop a poster that illustrates the rights of citizens and the responsibilities that those rights carry.
- 6 Does modern technology make the right to privacy easier or harder to protect? Write a report to share with your class that deals with the issues of privacy today.