

How might citizens participate in civic affairs?

LESSON PURPOSE

In this lesson you will learn about one of the most important rights of citizenship. This is the right to participate in governing our nation. In this lesson the different ways you might participate in your government and in voluntary organizations outside of government will be discussed. The lesson also suggests things to consider when deciding whether you should participate.

When you finish the lesson, you should be able to support your views on whether, and to what extent, a citizen should participate in government and in voluntary organizations.

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TERMS TO UNDERSTAND



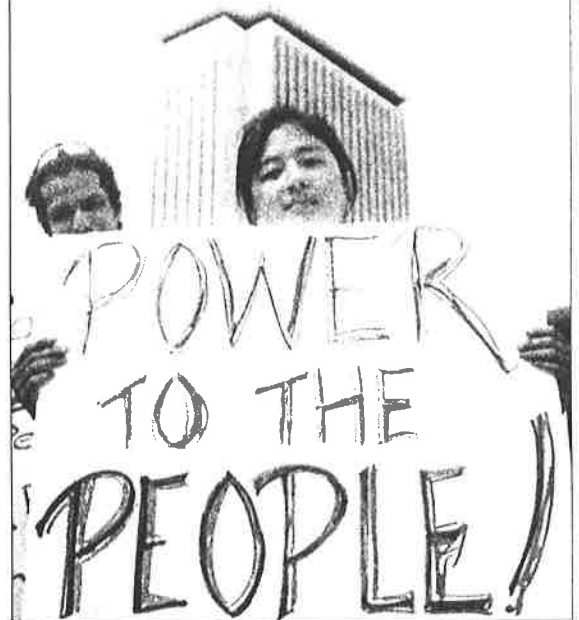
civic life
civic participation
constitutional principle
influence
monitor
political action
social action

What role should citizens have in government?

As you learned in the last lesson, in the United States each citizen is a full and equal member of the political community. Each citizen has certain basic rights and responsibilities. You also learned that government and citizens are both responsible for protecting the rights of individuals. Both are also responsible for promoting the common good.

Citizens have other vital roles in our government. One important role that citizens fulfill is to monitor the decisions and actions of government. To **monitor** means to keep watch over something. Citizens monitor government to be informed about what the government is doing in their name. They also monitor government to ensure that it serves the purposes for which it was created.

Another important role of citizens is to attempt to influence the decisions and actions of government. To **influence** means to have an effect on or to cause changes in something. It is the right of citizens to try to influence the decisions and actions of government that affect our lives.



From where do you get the right to influence your government?

In a sense, citizenship is an office of government. Some people might say that it is the highest office of government because citizens are the source of government's authority. Like any other office, citizenship carries important responsibilities.

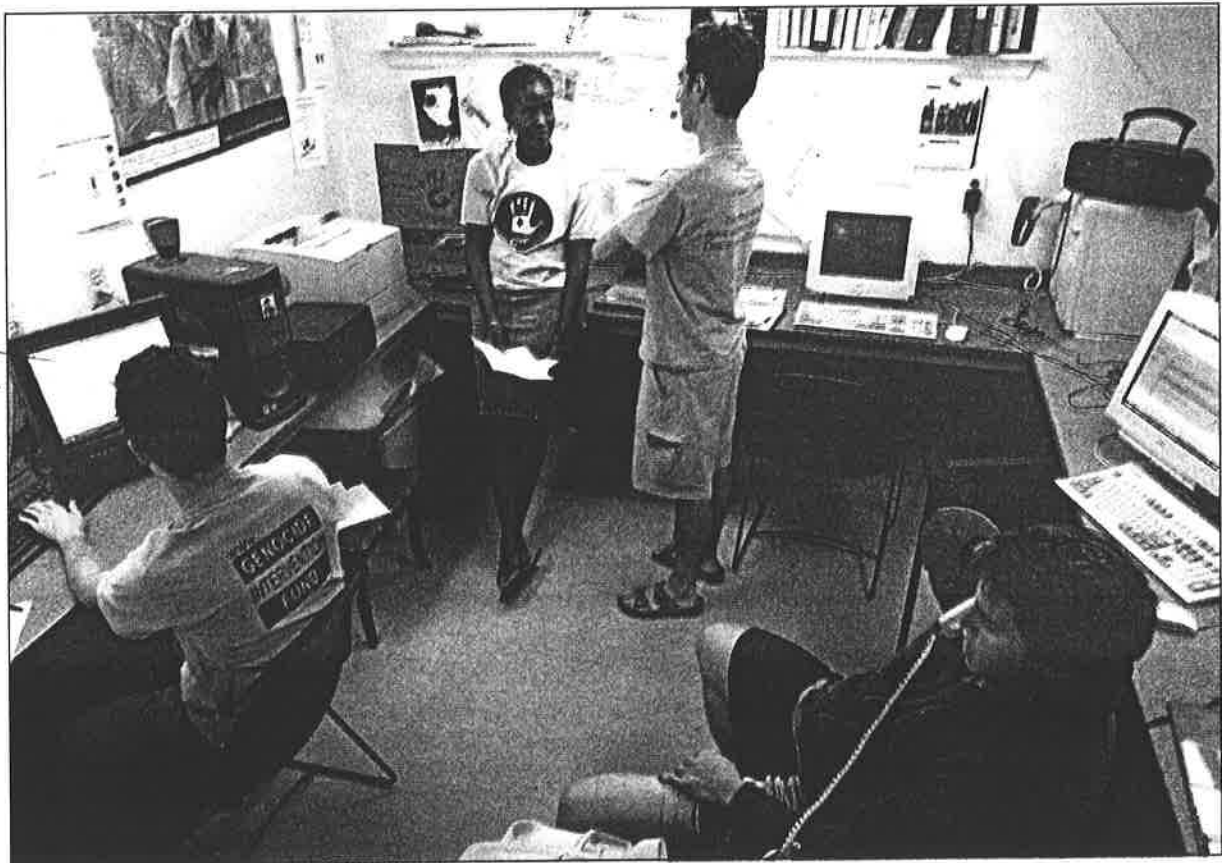
Civic participation means taking part in formal political processes and taking part in community activities outside of government. Millions of Americans participate in thousands of voluntary organizations and associations. These organizations seek to improve the life of the community in many different ways. Some benefit the poor, sick, or old people. Other organizations are concerned with the environment, health care, or the needs of children. They deal with many other community problems and issues.

Participating in these organizations gives community members the means to deal with community issues. It also allows them to participate in the way the organizations are run.

Government must deal with some matters such as arresting lawbreakers or establishing rules for building safety. There are other issues where government works with voluntary organizations to solve community problems. In other cases, voluntary organizations act by themselves to address community issues.

How much participation in government should citizens be willing to contribute?

Some citizens do not participate in government. They do not vote or take part in other ways. Some people, however, believe that citizens have a responsibility to participate.



What might be the advantages or disadvantages of joining volunteer organizations to influence government?



How would you respond to a poorly fixed bike from the bike shop? Would you respond in a similar way to something the government had done poorly?

Deciding whether to participate in government and how much time to spend is important. To make good decisions, you must think about such things as

- ❶ the purposes of government
- ❷ how important your rights are to you
- ❸ how satisfied you are with the way government is working

An example might help.

If you took your bike in for repairs, you would make sure that the shop repaired bicycles, not cars or toasters. Then when you claimed your bike, you would check it to make sure that they did what you had hired them to do.

If you thought they did a good job but your bike broke the next week, you might bring it back, but you would check or monitor their work more closely.

Suppose the shop wanted to do more repairs than those you requested. You would want to participate in making that decision. If you were denied the right to participate in the decision, you might be very upset, especially when you got the bill.

If the shop did a poor job on the repairs again, you would not go back nor would you recommend them to your friends. You might call various agencies to complain or you might even try to force them out of the bike repair business.

The same is true of government. We should make sure that the people we elect are capable of doing the job we are choosing them for. Once they get the job, we should monitor them to make sure they are doing their job of representing us correctly. If they do a good job, we might not watch them as closely. If they do a bad job, we might check them more closely and might even decide to replace them. Because our officials make decisions that affect us, we are entitled to participate in those decisions.

Of course, not all jobs have to be accomplished by government. Americans are famous for doing many things for themselves. We organize groups to accomplish

any number of things. These include building neighborhood swimming pools, discussing foreign policy issues, or improving our communities in hundreds of ways. Participating in these activities is also civic participation.

Some citizens mostly participate in formal governmental processes. Others participate mostly in volunteer groups. Many citizens take part in both forms of civic activity. Americans realize how important civic participation is. When civic participation declines, our democracy declines. It is not just others who are responsible for the civic health of our democracy. We are all responsible.



What are some of the ways citizens can monitor the decisions and actions of government?

How might citizens participate in their government?

Civic life is the public life of citizens. Civic life is different, but not necessarily separate, from private or personal life. In our personal life, we concern ourselves with our particular interests, such as getting an education or having a good job. Our civic life, on the other hand, is concerned with our own interests as well as the common affairs and interests of our community and nation.

Civic life includes the things that we do to carry out our responsibilities and roles as citizens. One example of this is

monitoring and influencing the decisions of government. Sometimes our actions can be both personal and civic. These include being a decision-maker or being a participant in nongovernmental organizations. For example, we might

- direct the activities or policies of organizations and associations. These could include voting for leaders or holding a leadership position yourself.
- take part in an organization's meetings and community activities such as rallies, fundraising, or writing, or handing out pamphlets and articles.



What are some examples of civic life?

What is political action and what is social action?

There are two general ways that citizens can address problems in the community through participation in civic life. They are social action and political action.

Political action comes in two forms: formal and informal.

- Formal political action means voting in elections, petitioning government officials, seeking and holding public office, and similar activities.
- Informal political action means face-to-face meetings with public officials, writing to newspapers stating your opinion on issues, conducting email or telephone campaigns, attending marches and demonstrations, and similar activities.

There is a wide range of political actions that citizens can engage in when attempting to influence the actions of government. These actions are relevant at local, state, and national levels.

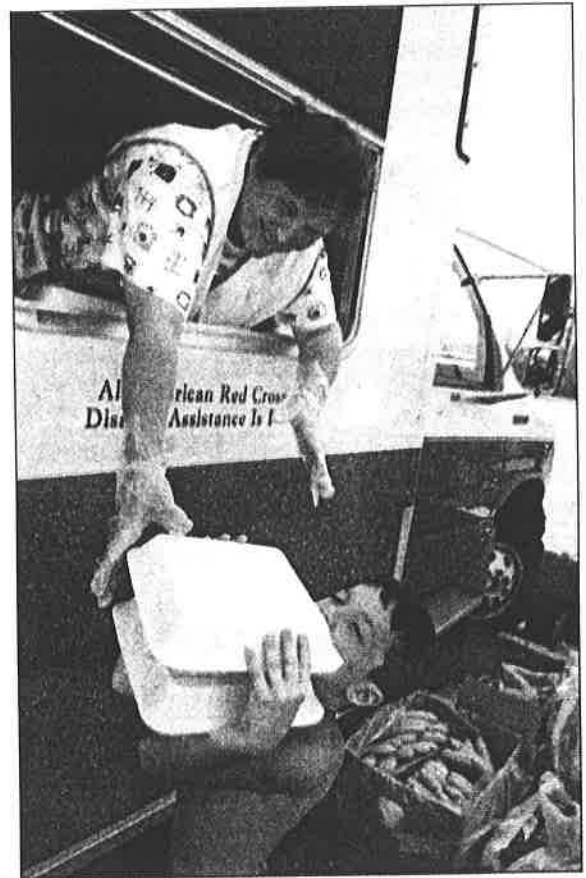
To help solve a crime problem you might meet with government officials requesting that they provide more police services to protect your neighborhood. In dealing with poverty, you might create a government program such as a food bank to feed the hungry. Then you might work to get government to adopt and pay for the program.

Social action means that individuals and groups solve community problems without relying on government to do it

for them. If you are dealing with crime in your neighborhood, you might form a neighborhood watch group. If you are dealing with poverty, you might work in a food bank organized by a charitable organization.

Why should I participate in the affairs of my community?

Participation in government is in our self-interest. The amount of time spent participating will probably depend on how well we think our elected officials are doing. When everything is going well, we might spend less time. If we are pleased with government, we might vote and do little else. When we are concerned



What are some examples of social action?

that government is not meeting our needs or is violating our rights, we might spend more time. If we are dissatisfied, we might engage in a variety of types of action.

Citizens must actively participate in the civic life of their community and nation if they want their voices heard. Citizenship in a democracy is more than a legal status. Democratic citizenship is a way of life that guides our relationships

with other people and with government.

Democracy can exist only if it lives in the minds and hearts of its citizens. Citizens should do more than say they are committed to democracy. They should demonstrate their commitment by their participation. It is up to each citizen to determine the level and nature of her or his participation in the civic life of the community and nation.



At the end of the Constitutional Convention, Mrs. Samuel Powell asked Benjamin Franklin "Well, Doctor, what have we got, a Republic or a Monarchy?" Franklin replied, "A Republic, if you can keep it."

From the notes of James McHenry, delegate from Maryland

LESSON REVIEW

- 1 How is political action different from social action?
- 2 Why are both political and social action necessary?
- 3 How is citizen participation in political action related to the purposes of our government?
- 4 Explain why participating in government is in our self-interest.

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Make a poster that demonstrates the different ways that citizens can participate in government. Take your own photos or use photographs from newspapers and magazines to illustrate each idea on your poster.
- 2 Use the Internet to find information about political action groups in your community that work to monitor and influence the decisions and actions of government.
- 3 Use the Internet to find information about social action groups in your community that work to address local community problems.
- 4 Monitor the newspaper in your community for one week. Look for articles that describe citizens participating in local, state, or national government.
- 5 Justice Louis Brandeis of the U.S. Supreme Court wrote, "The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen." Do you think that Justice Brandeis was correct? Write a short essay explaining your opinion.