



Citizenship

WHAT IS CITIZENSHIP?

At its most fundamental level, citizenship deals with how people relate to a particular government and to other citizens. As citizens, we expect certain things from government and other citizens; in turn, government and other citizens expect certain things from us. Generally, we can identify four ways in which to talk about citizenship.

First, we can think of citizenship in terms of obligation. As citizens, we are obliged to follow the law and respect the rights of other citizens. This obligation is usually understood in terms of self-interest. By following the law, we expect others to do the same. In this way, we, our families, and our property are protected from harm. Similarly, we are obligated to government so long as it fulfills its responsibility to make laws that protect us and to enforce these laws in a fair manner.

Second, citizenship describes a shared identity that binds people together. Rituals like reciting a pledge of allegiance or singing a national anthem help produce this common identity. While this may seem unimportant, a shared identity can justify sacrifices by citizens during wartime or economic crises and can encourage political participation, political efficacy, and political loyalty. Indeed, a government's ability to create this common identity can be seen as one measure of its success.

Third, citizenship entails political participation. In a democracy, the most obvious form of political participation is voting in elections. But citizens may also take part in the political process by attending town hall meetings, protesting governmental actions, writing their legislators, lobbying, or engaging in any number of activities in which individuals seek to influence public policy or the direction of government. If citizenship requires a shared identity, it also needs shared endeavors. Political participation constitutes one of the most important of these shared endeavors.

Finally, government must provide physical and legal protection for its citizens. But a person does not necessarily enjoy the full benefits of citizenship by simply being designated as a "citizen." For example, if citizenship in a democracy includes a right to vote and if a citizen is prevented from voting by threat or physical coercion, then that person is effectively not a full citizen. For citizenship to prevail, a citizen must be free to exercise his or her full citizenship rights.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Through the direct election of members of Congress, and the election of the president (via the Electoral College), the federal Constitution provides for direct

representation of the citizenry. To the extent that candidates compete in elections by offering citizens distinct and clear public policy choices, elections serve as public policy referenda. In addition to voting and engaging in political action, citizens also have ample opportunity to serve in public office. In the United States, there

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are over 500,000 elected officials, providing an opportunity for citizens to become directly involved in the policy-making and political processes.

American citizenship is a fluid, changing concept. Over time, citizens have gained greater influence over the political system through the direct election of United States senators, as well as through the introduction of party primaries. Significantly, voting restrictions that made some U.S. citizens second class have fallen away. Women, African Americans, and 18- to 20-year-old Americans have all gained the right to vote through constitutional amendments.

Despite these changes, a number of factors limit citizens' political influence. Only elected officials, and not the vast majority of citizens, have direct decision-making power. Although states use referenda in limited cases, all federal and most state decisions do not require a direct vote from citizens. Also, citizens have only a remote role in selecting and controlling the federal judiciary. While this often works to safeguard rights, since judges can interpret the law without fear of electoral defeat, it also creates a branch of government with comparatively little accountability. Lastly, the framers of the federal constitution envisioned the relatively long terms of United States senators and the Electoral College process as safeguards against too much democracy.

LEGAL PROTECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Citizenship in the United States affords numerous privileges and protections. The Bill of Rights secures fundamental rights, such as free speech, religious freedom, and a fair and speedy trial. It prohibits government from housing soldiers in citizens' houses, from taking land without just compensation to the owner, and from carrying out unreasonable searches without justification. The government cannot abridge these rights. In addition to the rights guaranteed in the Constitution, statutory entitlements such as Social Security and Medicare have become benefits associated with citizenship. While these rights are crucial for citizens, the scope of the rights is subject to change by court interpretation, legislation, and executive enforcement.

STATE CITIZENSHIP?

Does the concept of citizenship have any meaning within the individual states of the Union? Can a person be a citizen of Wisconsin? States granted citizenship until 1790 when Congress assumed this authority. Today, states issue driver's licenses but do not issue official documents of citizenship. Therefore, referring to a person as a "resident" of Wisconsin is more accurate than describing someone as a "citizen" of Wisconsin. Many of the components that go into United States citizenship, however, also apply at the state level. Wisconsin has its own laws, government, and collective identity, although all of these work within the framework of U.S. citizenship.

States do not grant citizenship, but they can permit noncitizens to vote and receive state benefits and entitlements. While noncitizen voting seems surprising today, Wisconsin's original constitution allowed noncitizen men to vote after only one year of residence. This provision, the first of its kind in the nation, was repealed in 1908.

WHO CAN BE A CITIZEN?

A person can attain American citizenship in two ways. First, the Fourteenth Amendment guarantees that all persons born in the United States are citizens, even if the person's parents are not American citizens. Second, immigrants can gain citizenship through a process called naturalization. To become naturalized, an immigrant must be a permanent resident, must have lived in the United States for five years, must be over the age of 18, must display good moral character, must agree with the principles of the Constitution, and must pass civics and English proficiency tests.

The pathway to citizenship has changed over the course of American history. Congress has required anywhere from 2 to 14 years of residency in the United States to complete naturalization and become a citizen. An 1875 federal law placed the first restrictions on persons such as criminals from entering the United States. In 1921, in the wake of mass immigration to the United States, Congress enacted the first legislation to limit substantially the number of immigrants permitted to enter the country. This question of who may become a citizen is just one of many issues citizens decide together.

CONCLUSION

Citizens take part in the political process by voting for political officials, running for office, and in various ways petitioning the government for a redress of grievances. They agree on a set of rights designed to ensure liberty and justice for all. By pledging allegiance to the United States, American citizens agree to fulfill their obligations by shouldering the burdens of citizenship. In these ways, they attempt to realize every day that government Abraham Lincoln spoke of, a "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

Governing Wisconsin: "Citizenship"

Study Questions

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| 1 | What steps must an immigrant follow to become a U.S. citizen through naturalization? | |
| 2 | Why would an immigrant to the United States want to become a citizen? | |
| 3 | On a chart, how would you show the ways in which a citizen relates to his or her government? | |
| 4 | In what ways does government limit the political participation of citizens? | |
| 5 | How would the U.S. be different if state citizenship were more important than federal citizenship? | |
| 6 | How strong is the link between the concepts of citizenship and self-governance? How has this relationship changed over time? | |

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Study Questions in the Cognitive Domain

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| 1 | What steps must an immigrant follow to become a U.S. citizen through naturalization? | To become naturalized, the immigrant must be a permanent resident, live in the U.S. for five years, be at least 18 years old, display good moral character, support the Constitution, and pass civics and English proficiency tests. | Cognition |
| 2 | Why would an immigrant to the United States want to become a citizen? | The Bill of Rights secures free speech, religious freedom, and a fair and speedy trial for U.S. citizens. Government cannot house soldiers in citizens' houses, cannot take land without just compensation to the owner, and cannot unreasonably search without justification. Social Security and Medicare are also benefits associated with citizenship. | Comprehension |
| 3 | On a chart, how would you show the ways in which a citizen relates to his or her government? | | Application |
| 4 | In what ways does government limit the political participation of citizens? | Limitations include the following: (1) we have a representative form of government, rather than a direct democracy; (2) some public officials are not elected but are appointed; and (3) some elected officials have very long terms of office. | Analysis |
| 5 | How would the U.S. be different if state citizenship were more important than federal citizenship? | To a greater extent, important political problems would be dealt with on the state level. Citizens would identify themselves first as citizens of their individual state and then as U.S. citizens. Obligations of citizenship and political participation would be channeled primarily through the state level. | Synthesis |
| 6 | How strong is the link between the concepts of citizenship and self-governance? How has this relationship changed over time? | The link is strong. The relationship between citizenship and self-governance has grown stronger over time: as various minority groups have achieved American citizenship, they have become involved in government and changed American society. | Evaluation |