

Civic Participation



Why should American citizens participate in the civic life of the country?

We have to remember that the American constitutional democracy can be associated to an experiment in self-government. In order to validate this theory, we the people have to participate.

How the people use their power directly affects their society. The people determine which problems they can solve by themselves and which problems need solving by their appointed governments, local, state and federal. Participation helps individuals become attached to their communities, regions, states, and the nation.

For many people, civic participation and engagement includes recommitting to the ideals that they have for themselves and understanding how those ideals are the fundamental principles of the American constitutional democracy.

It is a proven fact that those who participate in civic life are more likely to vote as well as being well-informed voters.

How do voluntary associations contribute to civic engagement?

Voluntary associations thrive in America. Associations engaged in civic projects are motivated by a commitment to making their communities and the world a better place. These associations rely on their members for ideas, volunteer time and money to carry out their activities. In response, those members gain a high, personal level of satisfaction for the efforts that they readily put into the organizations.

Most of the thousands of voluntary associations in the United States fall into the following categories:

1. Religious Organizations

Americans in general have shown relatively high levels of religious commitment and participation in various religious organizations. It is not unique to just one faith. Most religious groups perform community services such as caring for the sick, elderly and the poor. Religious organizations have been the leader in keeping the integrity of the nuclear family, raising teenagers within societies norms, protecting the environment, advancing civil rights and advocating for world peace and human rights.

2. Social organizations

Millions of Americans have joined groups that provide social opportunities and willingly assist one another in times of need. Most social groups also perform community service by sponsoring youth athletic events, collecting books for public libraries, and offering scholarships to students in need of financial assistance. Other examples are book clubs, sports clubs, and women's organizations.

3. Service and Business Organizations

In the early 1900's organizations such as the Kiwanis, Lions, Jaycees, and Rotary sprung up across the country. Such organizations address many issues from business networking to community service.

Kiwanis International "serves the children of the world" by promoting child safety, building playgrounds and running programs discouraging drinking, smoking, and drugs to younger people.

Lion Clubs International supports visions and health screenings, disaster relief and also awards students scholarships.

The **United States Junior Chamber (Jaycees)** raises money for cancer research.

What other local organizations are you aware of in your community and what do they do to assist?

4. Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO's)

In the past 50 years literally thousands of nonprofit organizations have been formed. They depend on charitable donations and volunteer service to address particular areas of concern to their members. NGO's are often classified by their area of focus such as disaster relief, economic development, the environment, or health care. Many groups listed above as social or service groups also fit into the category of a NGO.

Other examples are: League of Women Voters, the Carter Center, Athletes for Peace.

NGO's are becoming more significant in world affairs as well as strong influencers in domestic policies through lobbying and public education.

How can you participate in local and state governments?

Local government in America dates back to the early colonial times in New England. Their society learned the nature of their responsibilities as a community plus understood the real value of their rights. These opportunities still exist today with both local and state governments.

1. Local governments

There are tens of thousands of local governments in America, ranging from townships and cities to counties and special districts. Everyone in these communities is effected as local governments provide the essential services required for people to live together on a daily basis. Local elections are just as important, maybe more than national elections as they determine such items as the tax bases on property, school districts, and public locations such as recreation centers and libraries. Several people in the community are often willing to hold office themselves. Many city councils, county commissions, school districts, and other districts do not pay elected officials a salary. These officials are volunteers.

In addition to elected officials, local governments rely on citizen advisory boards and commissions. Examples being police review boards, civil rights advisory commission, library advisory boards. It is to be noted that students are allowed and are often active participants on positions in advisory boards.

2. State governments

All 50 states have representative governments with structures similar to the national level such as separated and shared powers. Voters make informed decisions about who is to be governor and other executive officers. Many states elect their judges, including justices of the peace, municipal judges, country trial judges, and state appellate judges.

Like local governments, state governments also rely on residents to serve on boards and commissions to study and make recommendations to elected officials about matters such as child welfare, drug and alcohol programs, and environmental issues.

Most Americans who are active in either local or state governments take pride in their accomplishments. Their involvements really help their communities and they become more thoughtful and informed than before.

Essential questions

1. What are the five most important issues facing the state and local governments where you live? How can you become informed about these issues?
2. What considerations would convince you to run for a state or local office or to work on a state or local political campaign? Explain.

How can Americans participate in National Government?

The opportunity to serve on a national level is much less than on a state or local level however such opportunities do exist. Political parties play a key role in decision making and party participation is open to all interested Americans regardless of age or background. Political parties develop **grassroots organizations** that encourage and welcome participation. Political party membership offers opportunities to work on campaigns such as getting out the vote and shaping party platforms and goals for the future.

Members of Congress often hold “Town Hall” meetings in their districts to discuss issues with their constituents. Constituents can communicate with national officials in many ways by using emails, letters, telephone calls, and by visiting their offices in both their home district and in the nation’s capital.

Another way that Americans can influence their national government is by joining voluntary associations and NGO’s that lobby. In addition, a person’s voice can be heard when taking part in a public opinion poll. It is often seen that public opinion can have a significant effect on legislation and even presidential decisions.



What needs to be done to encourage voter turnout?

Two important terms in United States history, **popular sovereignty** and **representative government**, mean that voters have the authority and the responsibility to decide who will serve as elected officials in all of America's governments.

Elections in the United States are administered at the state and local levels with some assistance from the Federal Election Commission. All states (except North Dakota) require those who wish to vote to establish eligibility by registering with county officials. Voter Registration Lists are maintained by state and local election officials. These lists help them determine how many polling or voting locations they will need within a specific demographic area.

In 1993 Congress approved the **National Voter Registration Act** which created uniform standards that made it much easier to register to vote. You can now register by mail or at your local Department of Motor Vehicle or other government offices. Other changes include early voting and absentee ballots which are used after simply filling out a form in advance of the election.

Oregon has a vote-by mail system and other states now allow people to cast ballots in person days and even weeks before the elections are held.



Other ways and methods to consider about elections:

- Presidential elections should be held on a National Holiday
- Elections be held on a Saturday or Sunday as not to interfere with the work-week
- Polling places should be kept open for 24 hours straight
- National elections should be held over several days given people more time to vote and shorter lines at the polling stations

What other ideas do you have to improve election days?

How is civic participation connected to self-interest?

Many Americans do so because they realise that it is in their favor. Business people serve on community boards as they know that it is good for their business as they are making a "good" name for themselves. Parents volunteer to make safer and healthier communities for their children. Homeowners joining community groups and form neighborhood associations because they care about the value of their property. There is also a great degree of self-improvement such as public speaking, networking, and improving decision making as well as creating a good reputation within the community.

How is civic participation related to advancing the common good?

Working with others frequently makes people aware of different perspectives and often leads to a better understanding of the common good. Individuals must see themselves as part of a larger whole and must modify their behavior to serve the needs of the whole.

Below is a short exercise about civic participation, self-interest, and common good.

Assume that there is an upcoming election in your community. One of the measures on the ballot asks property owners to agree to an increase in their property taxes to fund schools and playgrounds.

Explain how an appeal to self-interest or the common good might influence the following groups of voters to support the tax increase.

- Parents of school-age children
- Senior citizens who have no children in school
- High school seniors (first-time voters) who are looking forward to graduation
- Members of a civic organization with a community service focus on homelessness
- Small-business owners whose profit margins are small.

We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.” – Pericles, Athenian statesman.

“The quality of our public debates depends not only on the right of all to express their ideas freely, but also on a community willing to listen to their views. That is, meaningful participation in the constitutional conversation involves both speech and reflective silence.” Toni Marie Massaro, law professor.

