

Topic: IV. Ways to Participate

What the students do: Read about and discuss responsible citizenship and prioritize civic participation activities.

[CA History-Social Science Standards:](#) 12.2.3, 12.2.4, 12.2.5, 12.3.2

[CMS Promising Approaches:](#) 1, 2, and potentially 3

Thanks to: [Constitutional Rights Foundation](#)

Civic Participation and Responsibility

Overview

In this lesson, students explore how citizens can participate in civic life. First, they read about and discuss the responsibilities of being a citizen. Then in small groups, they decide on and rank five activities that they believe citizens should do beyond voting, obeying the law, serving on juries, and paying taxes.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify elements of good citizenship and methods of civic participation.
- Identify character traits that contribute to civic responsibility.
- Understand how civic participation can fulfill individual and community goals.
- Decide and rank the importance of activities that all citizens should do.

Materials/Preparation

Handout: “Civic Participation and Responsibility”—1 per student.

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

A. Hold a brief discussion by asking students:

- In a democracy, who holds the ultimate power? (The people.)
- For a democracy to work, what do citizens have to do? (Accept various answers.)

B. Tell students that they are going to pursue this last question in depth.

II. Reading and Discussion

A. Distribute **Handout 1: “Civic Participation and Responsibility”** to each student. Ask students to read it and look for activities that citizens should do.

B. When students finish reading, hold a discussion using the questions on the handout:

1. Why do you think it is important for citizens in a democracy to be involved in the democracy?
2. What are some current and historical examples of citizen movements in America?

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III. Activity—Participating Citizens

- A. Divide students into groups of four or five students each.
- B. Review “Activity: Participating Citizens” on the handout. Answer any questions students may have.
- C. When students finish with their group discussion, call on groups to report what they consider the most important activity a citizen can do and why. Hold a class discussion. Write each activity on the board.
- D. Conduct a vote to see which activities the class as a whole considers most important.

IV. Enrichment Activity—Take Action!

Challenge your students to take action on an issue, community problem, or policy they care about. Consider having your students follow these steps to address their issue:

1. Identify and describe the issue.
2. Research the issue (pros/cons, causes/effects).
3. Research current policies and viewpoints about the issue.
4. Brainstorm and evaluate options for addressing the issue (consider how much time you have, what your resources are, etc.)
5. Create an action plan to implement your best option (objective, tasks, team, timeline, how will you gauge your success).
6. Implement your plan!
7. Reflect on your successes/challenges and what you learned through the process.
8. Share your work with others.

Options for addressing issues your students might consider:

- Write letters:
 - Legislators
 - Letter to newspaper editor
 - Community agencies/advocacy groups
 - Community leaders/activists working on issue
- Organize and sponsor:
 - Debates
 - Panel discussions
 - Community forum/fair about the issue
- Volunteer:
 - On a campaign for a candidate whose platform includes addressing the issue
- Create and implement your own project:
 - Issue:* Voter participation
 - Project:* Voter registration drive for young voters, new immigrants, or others

 - Issue:* Healthcare for children
 - Project:* Research organizations offering free mobile services and work to organize an event in your community. Put the word out!

Civic Participation and Responsibility

In a democracy, the ultimate power belongs to the people. If a democracy is to work, the people must be involved. Civic participation is essential to the workings of a constitutional democracy.

As voters, citizens should carefully consider their choices of governmental representatives, leaders, and judges. To do so, they must stay informed about the issues and the positions of candidates. Also citizens must be prepared to serve on juries so that the right to a fair and impartial trial can be preserved. Further, citizens must be willing to pay taxes to assure a common defense, public safety, and other essential governmental services.

Beyond these basics, a citizen should do much more. A citizen needs to understand constitutional principles, debate their meaning, and be prepared to defend them. Citizens need to know how to participate in the political processes of government so that they can influence public policy. Our federal system offers many opportunities to do so. Citizens can attend political and governmental meetings such as those of the state legislature or city council. Citizens can contact and express their views to elected officials. Citizens can write letters to representatives or to newspapers on issues of public policy.

Citizens can also work with others in political campaigns or circulate petitions, demonstrate, picket, or boycott to make their voices heard. These kinds of actions have brought great changes to America over the years. Such actions won women the right to vote during the suffrage campaigns and helped achieve greater equality for African-Americans and other minority groups during the civil rights movement.

Citizens can also decide to take a leadership role in public affairs. One way is to run for office. Another is to serve on one the many commissions, boards, and grand juries at every level of government. Citizens can also devote their lives to public service as governmental workers, police officers, teachers, fire fighters, judges, prosecutors, and public defenders.

Participation in Civil Society

Participation in government and the political process, though crucial to the health of a democratic republic, is not the only way to demonstrate effective citizenship. Many argue that citizens owe a commitment to the betterment of their communities by direct action. There are many ways to participate.

Joining and participating in community organizations such as service clubs, church groups, or charity leagues bring community members together to form bonds, discuss common interests, and address community problems.

Each year, millions of Americans volunteer their time to help solve community problems and address community needs. People volunteer for community clean-ups, to visit nursing homes, to build shelters for the homeless, to help feed the hungry, and to mentor and teach reading to children. Millions of Americans also participate in fund-raising activities and give money to charities. While these actions do not necessarily involve political participation, they do help create a much better society and a healthier country.

Civic Character

Certain character traits improve a citizen's ability to meet civic responsibilities and contribute to a healthy society. Some are personal traits. Self-reliance, supporting one's family, making sure one's children are educated, and earning a living are all personal traits that benefit society.

To be a truly responsible citizen, however, requires more. It is important that citizens respect the law and be law-abiding. Yet, there are times when citizens, on deeply held moral grounds may refuse to obey what they consider to be an unjust law or refuse a civic responsibility such as the draft.

It is important that citizens respect individual worth and human dignity and show compassion for fellow citizens. This includes respecting the rights, choices, and contrary opinions of others. It is important that citizens develop a loyalty to the principles of American constitutional democracy and be willing to defend them. For American constitutional democracy to thrive, it is important that citizens invest of themselves in assuring its continuance.

For Discussion

1. Why do you think it is important for citizens in a democracy to be involved in the democracy?
2. What are some current and historical examples of citizen movements in America? Explain what each was trying to achieve.

A C T I V I T Y

Participating Citizens

There are basic things that every citizen should do: Obey the law, vote, serve on juries, and pay taxes. But what else should citizens do to ensure a strong democracy?

In your group, do the following:

1. Discuss and decide on five activities, aside from basic things listed above, American citizens should participate in to keep our democracy strong.
2. Decide which one of the five activities is the most important and why.
3. Be prepared to explain to the rest of the class why your top-rated activity is the most important one.