

PROJECT Citizen
A WE THE PEOPLE PORTFOLIO-BASED PROGRAM

LEVEL 2



Administered by the Center for Civic Education
in cooperation with the National Conference of State Legislatures

STEP X

Why Is Citizen Participation Important to Democracy?



PURPOSE

The purpose of this final step is to help you understand why citizen participation is important to democracy. You will discuss the

importance of participation, how people can participate, and the possible consequences of low citizen participation in a democracy.

A Group Activity— Examining the Roles and Responsibilities of Citizens in a Democracy

The following three quotations address some of the roles and responsibilities of citizens and their government in a democracy. Your class will work in three or more groups. Each group should read one of the quotations and respond to the questions that follow it. Groups should then prepare to present and discuss their answers with the entire class.



Group 1

If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in a democracy, they will be attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.

*Aristotle, Politics
(c. 340 B.C.)*

- 1** What argument can you make to support the idea that “all persons alike” must “share in the government to the utmost” in a democracy for liberty and equality to flourish?
- 2** If “all persons alike” must “share in the government to the utmost” in a democracy for liberty and equality to flourish, what responsibilities of citizens does this imply?
- 3** What argument can you make to support the idea that liberty and equality are more likely to be found in a democracy than in another form of government?
- 4** Do you agree with Aristotle’s statement? Why or why not?



Group 2

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.

Thomas Jefferson (1820)

- 1 What argument can you make to support the idea that the ultimate powers of society should be placed in the hands of the people instead of an elite group of knowledgeable people?
- 2 If the ultimate powers of the society are placed in the hands of the people, what responsibilities does this imply for individuals and the people as a whole?
- 3 What might be the consequences for democracy if a large number of people are “not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion”?
- 4 What responsibilities does this imply for citizens and their government?



Group 3

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever does.

*Margaret Mead
(1901–1978)*

- 1 What arguments can you give for and against this statement?
- 2 What examples can you give of small groups of citizens making significant changes in their communities, states, nations, or the world? How were they able to achieve their goals?
- 3 What steps would you take if you wanted to make a significant change in your community? Do you think it might be possible for you to do so? Why or why not?

B What Are the Roles of Citizens in a Democracy?

As you learned in previous steps, it is important for citizens to work together to develop and support public policy solutions to problems that face their communities. You have learned how to monitor and influence public policy decisions. You may even have been successful in getting your proposed policy considered or adopted by public officials. Even if you tried and your policy was not considered or adopted, however, you have acquired valuable knowledge and important skills that will enable you to become a more competent and responsible participant in our constitutional democracy.

C Critical Thinking Exercise

The following are the same questions that you answered in Step I. Without looking back to see what you wrote then, answer the questions again now that you have completed the Project Citizen program. Compare your answers before and after the program and discuss them with your class.

Conclusion

It is important for all citizens to increase their knowledge and develop the skills that will enhance their ability to monitor and influence the development and implementation of public policy. Public policies need to be monitored by citizens and sometimes need to be revised. New problems, interests, or goals may require new public policies. Having a voice in the development and implementation of public policies is a right and responsibility of all citizens in a self-governing society.

The sponsors of Project Citizen hope that the experiences and learning it has fostered will encourage you to take an active role in the political life of your community, state, and nation. If the United States is to fulfill its historic mission of being a nation “by the people, for the people, and dedicated to liberty and justice for all,” it is essential for you to take a part in your system of self-government.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1 To what extent, if any, do citizens have a responsibility to take part in the civic life of their community?

- a** no responsibility
- b** some responsibility
- c** a large responsibility
- d** a very large responsibility

Explain your answer.

2 To what extent, if any, do citizens have a responsibility to participate in the public policymaking processes at local, state, and national levels?

- a** no responsibility
- b** some responsibility
- c** a large responsibility
- d** a very large responsibility

Explain your answer.

3 What can citizens do to monitor the development and implementation of public policy in their community?

4 What can citizens do to influence the development and implementation of public policy in their community?

5 How can citizens gain access to governmental agencies in their communities, their states, and the nation?

6 In what ways can the voluntary organizations of civil society participate in the formulation and in some instances in the implementation of public policy?

7 What might be some consequences of an individual deciding not to participate in civic life? What might be the consequences if large numbers of individuals do not participate in civic life?

