American Citizenship

Community Involvement
Political Participation
Voting and Elections
State and Local Government
Volunteerism
Charitable Giving

"The most important political office is that of private citizen."

LOUIS D. BRANDEIS

ASSOCIATE JUSTICE OF THE U.S. SUPREME COURT
1916–1939


SEAL OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Contents

Above: Volunteers help to rebuild the Gulf Coast of Mississippi after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Opposite: President John F. Kennedy gives his inaugural address in 1961, calling on Americans to "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

In the United States, government serves the citizens. It protects constitutional rights, including freedom of speech and religion, and the right to equal protection under the law. American citizens exercise many rights and privileges that empower them to participate fully in the nation's political, economic, and cultural life.

Other countries define their national identity—what it means to be a citizen of that country—primarily through common characteristics: ethnicity, origin, ancestry, religion, or history. But in these areas, there is little common ground among citizens of the United States. They—or their ancestors—come from every continent and every country around the world. What binds this diverse group of individuals together is the shared belief that individual liberty is the essential characteristic of free government.

U.S. citizens also recognize that they have a responsibility to their society if they are to enjoy the protection of their rights. Americans willingly, for the most part, live within the law, serve on juries when called upon, pay their fair share of taxes, and exercise their right to vote responsibly. Civic participation in the United States also means

Opposite, top: Martin Luther King Jr., center, leads a 1965 march in Montgomery, Alabama, to protest lack of voting rights for African Americans. Bottom: Volunteers build a playground for children in a low-income neighborhood in Highland Park, Michigan.

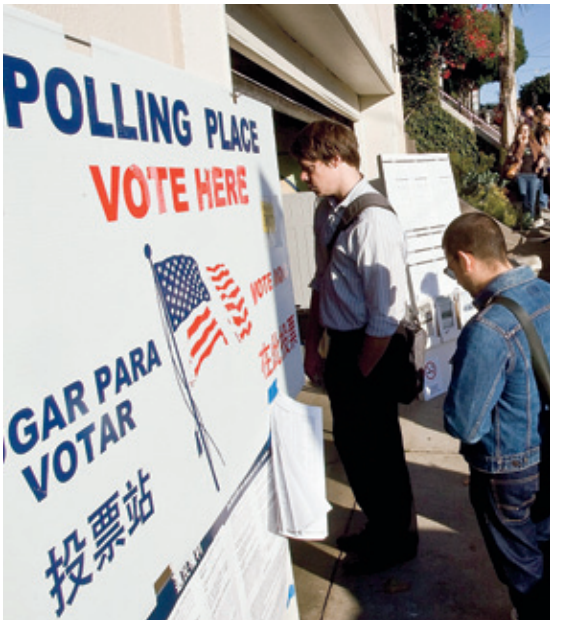
that citizens respect the rights of others, accept the authority of the elected government, and make an effort to be informed, involved, and invested in their communities and their nation.

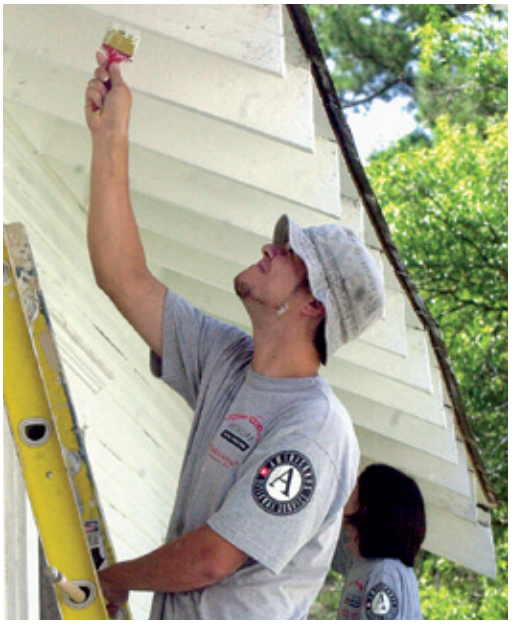
President John F. Kennedy (1961–1963) offered another definition of citizenship when he said in his inaugural address,

> "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

During his brief administration, Kennedy inspired young Americans to join government programs that worked to fight poverty at home and abroad. Though an assassin cut short the Kennedy presidency after only one thousand days, the challenge of his inaugural speech continues to inspire Americans not only to ask—but to act—to help their country, their communities, and their world.

This book describes some of the activities and responsibilities that Americans take on voluntarily to be good citizens and to better their neighborhoods, communities, and states. Hundreds of thousands serve in positions in local and state government or engage in campaigns to promote particular candidates or issues. Tens of millions give their free time to volunteer in nonprofit organizations that work for a greater good or devote part of their income to a worthy cause. In thousands of ways, Americans contribute to their society and their country, understanding that citizenship is a privilege to be paid for over and over again.





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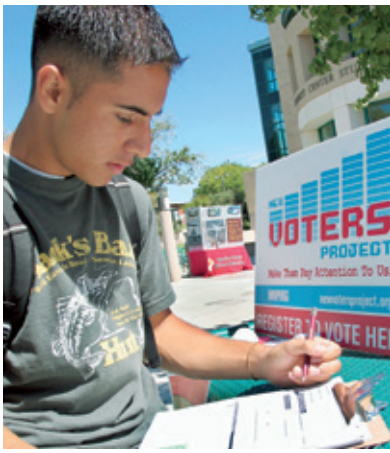
The responsibility of citizenship calls Americans to participate in the political process and to volunteer in their communities. Above, clockwise from lower left: College students in Austin, Texas, give their time to spruce up a neighborhood by planting trees; citizens wait in line in San Francisco, California, to vote in the 2008 presidential election; AmeriCorps volunteers paint a house in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 2003.

Voting
A right and a responsibility

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States (1861–1865), perhaps best described democracy when he said democracy is a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." There is no government "by the people," however, unless citizens choose their leaders through free and fair elections.



Voting is a fundamental right and responsibility of U.S. citizens—the right to have a say in how they are governed and the responsibility to be informed about candidates and issues when they go to the polls.

The United States was founded, in large part, on the desire of its people to participate in the decisions of their government. Surprisingly, perhaps, the U.S. Constitution itself did not address the right to vote or who was eligible to participate. The prevailing view when the Constitution was written in 1787 was that only white men who owned property were qualified to vote, because they had an interest in preserving society to protect their wealth and because they had the independence and education to decide important political matters.

Fortunately, times change. By the mid–19th century, property requirements were dismantled and virtually all adult white males

were able to vote. Soon after, the United States engaged in the Civil War (1861–1865) over the right of states to allow slavery within their borders. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in 1865; the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 guaranteed "equal protection of the laws" to all citizens and established the voting age as 21 years; and the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 stated that no citizen should be denied the right to vote "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

This was progress, but half of the U.S. population still could not vote: women. Agitation for universal suffrage began in the mid-19th century, but the turning point came when the United States entered World War I in 1917. How could the United States fight for democracy overseas while denying it to half the population at home? Obviously, it could not, and the Nineteenth Amendment granted women the right to vote in 1920.

In the mid-20th century, another foreign conflict led to expansion of the franchise. Thousands of young Americans fought in the Vietnam War, many of them teenagers. They were old enough to fight for their country, yet not old enough to vote. Public outcry and political will led to passage of the Twenty-sixth Amendment, granting the vote to 18, 19, and 20 year olds in 1971.

In spite of the many struggles to guarantee all citizens the right to vote, the percentage of Americans who exercise that right declined during the second half of the 20th century. No single reason explains this trend. Some citizens may feel that their single vote does not make a difference; some may lose interest in campaigns run primarily through the media. Others may simply be too busy to go to the polls every time there is an election. Americans vote for every political office from school board member to state legislator to congressional representative to president of the United States, as well as on a host of state and local matters. Often, citizens are asked to vote on *something* several times in one year. The challenge of citizenship is to get to know the candidates and to understand the issues in order to vote responsibly.

An apparent shift in the low-turnout trend occurred between the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. The historically close election of 2000 perhaps convinced voters that every vote *does* matter, and voter turnout increased from 60 percent of eligible voters in 2000 to 64 percent in 2004 and 2008. The increase in voters between the ages of 18 and 29 was even more dramatic. Project Vote, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to empower under-represented voters, estimates that turnout in this age group in 2008 increased by 9 percent from 2004.

Top: A college student registers to vote at New Mexico State University in September 2004, during a campus voter registration drive. Above: Voting line in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Young Voters Turn Out

by Sam Barrett

The presidential election of 2008 demonstrated the enormous influence young people can bring to the democratic process when a cause or a candidate energizes them. All across the United States, young people of diverse backgrounds volunteered tirelessly for Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain.

Political activity was one of the hottest campus trends at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) in 2008, and a variety of groups, some with competing agendas, worked day and night to win support from fellow students. Their combined efforts resulted in an on-campus voter turnout rate of almost 90 percent, according to an estimate by Penn Leads the Vote, exceeding the nation's average turnout by nearly 30 percent.

"In recent history, there's been a tendency to ignore youth," said Annassa Corley, president of Penn Leads the Vote. "We have really turned that around and shown it is possible to engage youth."

Even groups with an avowed agenda wanted young people to recognize their eligibility and make the trip to the polls, no matter who they supported. "Whether you voted for McCain or Obama," said Mike Stratton, co-president of Penn for Obama,

> "the key is that you voted—that you participated, that you showed your civic duty, and that you used your vote to help change America."

Penn Leads the Vote, founded before the 2004 presidential election and run entirely by Penn students, used a massive data-driven campaign to register students at the Philadelphia campus. Campaign volunteers identified unregistered voters or voters registered out of state, guided them through the registration process, and then helped them locate their polling location—usually just a few blocks away from where they lived at school—so that they had no excuse to miss out on Election Day.

"You're really empowering people to take that first step and vote. We don't really care who they vote for, but we do care that they are able to represent themselves," Corley said.

Beyond the Penn campus, other national nonpartisan groups have used television, public service announcements, and celebrity star power to encourage young voters to get involved. Most also use the growing influence of Web sites like Facebook and Twitter to connect with potential voters.

Opposite, counterclockwise from upper right: Annassa Corley, president of Penn Leads the Vote; members of the organization; Mike Stratton, co-president of Penn for Obama; student volunteers register a new voter; the University of Pennsylvania campus.

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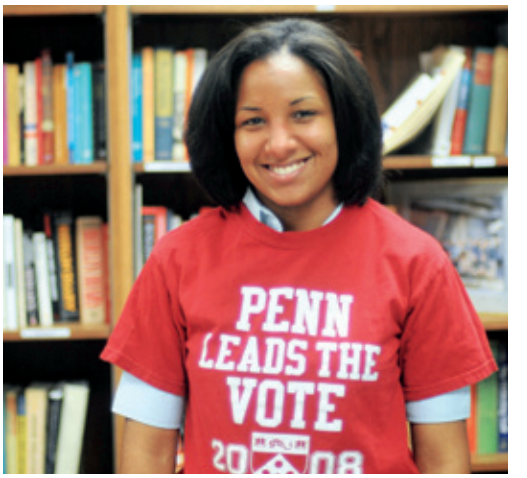
An expanded version of this article is available online: www.america.gov/st/usg-english/2010/February/20100203155600Mo.3311731.html



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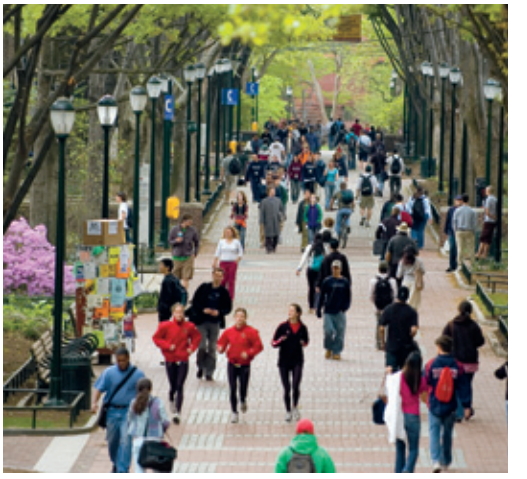



VOTE
VOTE

The Other Side of the Ballot

Elections in the United States are not only about the candidates running for office. Frequently voters are asked to decide public policy issues for their states and communities.

Statewide questions make their way to the voting booth through one of two routes: a ballot initiative or a legislative referendum. A ballot initiative is a mechanism for citizens to propose policy changes, while a legislative referendum is proposed by the state legislature, an elected official, or a government agency or commission.

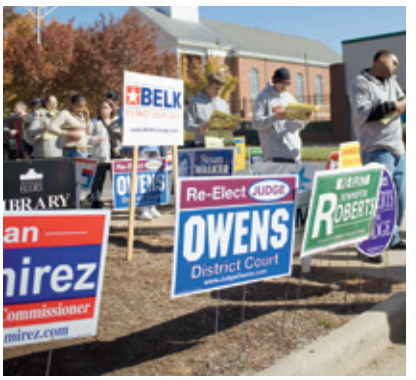
Ballot initiatives are permitted in only 24 of the 50 states, so legislative referenda generally outnumber ballot initiatives in any election year. In the year 2008, for example, 153 statewide measures were voted on by citizens: 92 legislative referenda and 61 ballot initiatives.

What are all these ballot measures about? Often they concern hot-button issues that citizens think are not being addressed by elected officials or that private-interest groups are promoting. In the case of referenda, legislators may not find agreement among themselves to enact a new policy or law, and they may think that voters should decide the matter.

Ballot questions reflect issues that are on the minds of Americans. In 2008 some of the most controversial ballot issues involved abortion, immigration policy, and same-sex marriage. Other issues that voters considered in several different states were renewable energy, criminal justice, drug policy, election rules, and legislative pay and term limits.

Closer to home, local governments often place bond issues on election ballots. Voters are asked to decide whether their jurisdiction should sell bonds to raise money for construction or improvement projects involving community assets, such as schools and libraries, parks and recreation centers, and roads and bridges.

Opposite: A voter casts her ballot in the November 2004 presidential election at an elementary school in Battle Creek, Michigan. Right: Voters line up outside a polling place in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2008.



State and Local Government

Americans are citizens not only of their country but of their states and local communities as well. In addition to the federal government, seated in Washington, D.C., governments are established in each of the 50 state capitals and in thousands of cities, towns, and counties across the country.

Each level of government holds responsibility for certain needs of its citizens. The federal government, of course, is responsible for national security and for ensuring the fair treatment of all Americans. At the state level, officials handle the unique concerns of their own population: matters involving industries located in the state, transportation networks, natural resources, and social service needs. Local officials primarily perform such day-to-day functions as maintaining public schools and libraries, providing fire and police protection, and ensuring reliable provision of water and utilities.

Tens of thousands of Americans serve on local government bodies, including school boards, city and town councils, public works commissions, planning boards, and election commissions. Outside of government structures, millions more are involved in volunteer activities in their neighborhoods.

In Fifty States

As the U.S. Congress meets in Washington, D.C., state legislatures convene in each of the 50 state capitals to discuss state issues and make laws that apply to citizens within their own borders. Like the Congress, 49 of the states have two-house legislatures, composed predominantly of members of the two major political parties, Republican and Democratic. Only the state of Nebraska maintains a one-house legislature and all its members are officially labeled as Independents.

A total of 7,382 Americans serve in state legislatures, elected by their fellow citizens for term lengths prescribed in state constitutions. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the average age of state lawmakers is 56, with 61 percent between the ages of 30 and 60; nationally, 22.6 percent of them are women.

Until the 1960s, state legislatures generally met every other year for a limited number of days. Individual legislators were poorly paid and had little or no staff support. Today, however, 45 states hold annual legislative sessions, and many have increased legislative pay and added professional staff support. Still, the amount of time a legislator needs to fulfill his or her job varies greatly from state to state.

In large, industrialized states such as California, Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania, for example, being a state legislator is a full-time job. In small or less populated states such as Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming, the work of a state legislator occupies about 50 percent of his or her time. The other 40 states fall somewhere in between.

Legislators' salaries reflect the demands of their jobs. Where the work is greatest, legislators are paid enough to live without needing outside income. At the other end of the spectrum, legislators receive low salaries and they continue to devote time to their private-sector careers to make a comfortable living. The NCSL reports that there is "a higher concentration of legislators serving during their income-earning years in states that maintain a full-time legislature with a higher salary. Legislatures that operate on a part-time basis and have lower salaries tend to have a higher number of younger and retired legislators."

Whatever the size of a state legislature or the salary of its members, the importance of their work cannot be underestimated. Addressing a group of state legislators meeting in Washington in 2009, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi said, "States are the laboratories for so many ideas. Some of the things that we [in Congress] have confidence to run with are things that have worked at the state level."

Top: In Massachusetts, the speaker of the state house of representatives delivers his annual address to citizens. Above: Two state senators take the oath of office as a new session begins.