

# Citizenship



## The simple view...

Most people in the world are legal citizens of one or another nation state, and this entitles them to certain privileges or rights. Being a citizen also imposes certain duties in terms of what the state expects from individuals under its jurisdiction. Thus, citizens fulfil certain obligations to their state and in return they may expect protection of their vital interests. Or that is the way it should be.

## The complications...

There are two main questions that complicate this simple equation:

1. Which rights are states *obliged* to guarantee their citizens and on what terms?
2. What happens to those citizens that do not, for one reason or another, have the protection of the country in which they are resident?

To answer the first of these questions, we need to have a clearer idea of what being a citizen or what *citizenship* really means, and we shall look at that below. To answer the second question, we would need to look at why some people in the world do not possess citizenship of the country where they are resident and what can be done about it. This debate is really just beginning and in this section we shall raise only some of the questions.

## What is citizenship?

People have been discussing the idea of citizenship for thousands of years and even today there is no absolute agreement on exactly what it means. The concept of *legal* citizenship appears to be relatively simple: this is normally linked to a nation state and is defined in terms of the laws of that nation. This is perhaps why, for many people, the idea of citizenship has an immediate connection with the idea of patriotism: a “good citizen” is often thought to be a “good patriot”.

However, the concept of citizenship has far more layers of meaning than mere patriotism, as we can see from the historical origins of the idea, set out in the next section. A helpful distinction to bear in mind is that between a citizen, on the one hand, and a subject, on the other.



## Should citizens always obey the law?

### Related activities

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- Beware, we are watching, page 95.
  - “Draw the word” game, page 120.
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## Historical conceptions of citizenship

It is useful to look at some of the more important developments in the idea of citizenship, since this helps to bring out the various strands of meaning that are discussed today.

- The origin of citizenship can be traced back to Ancient Greece, when “citizens” were those who had a legal right to participate in the affairs of the state. But by no means everyone was a citizen: slaves and women, in particular, were mere subjects. For those who did have the privileged status of being citizens, the idea of “civic virtue” or being a “good” citizen was an important part of the concept. This tradition led to an emphasis on the *duties* that citizens were supposed to perform.
- The association of citizenship with national identity arose naturally from the fact that the legal status of a “citizen” was always tied to a nation state, hence the link between citizenship and patriotism.
- The liberal view of citizenship, which was developed in the nineteenth century, emphasised the importance of *rights* for all citizens. As the franchise began to be gradually extended, so justice and political rights became a reality for an increasing proportion of the population.
- In the twentieth century, the supporters of “social citizenship” went further, in recognising that civil and political rights are only part of what citizens ought to be able to expect from the state. The rise of the welfare state in the last century owed a great deal to thinkers who argued that rights of citizens ought to cover their own living and working conditions, rather than just their participation in “high” politics.
- The concept of “multiple citizenship” has been in existence for a while and allows that individuals may simultaneously be citizens of more than one state or organising body. For example, with the development of the European Union, citizens of the member states increasingly possess some rights from and duties to the Union as a whole, and not only to their own nation state.
- A final strand in the concept of citizenship, but one that is gaining increasing importance, involves the idea of *education*. If citizenship in the traditional sense involves *enjoying* rights and also *performing* duties, then there is a sense in which citizens may be said to be *not born, but created*. Loyalty and responsibility, for example, are qualities that need to be learned and cultivated. So, if these are qualities that are essential to being a citizen in the full meaning of the term, then “real” citizens need to be educated – in the broadest sense of the word.

Today, most people’s notion of citizenship will include elements of each of the six concepts outlined above, although in different proportions. Some people will emphasise the “duties” element, while others will give more importance to “rights” or “patriotism”, or to the qualities that should be possessed by “real” citizens.

## The link with human rights

We can see that both rights and responsibilities have been an important part of the notion of citizenship from the earliest days: citizens are expected to possess certain fundamental rights, and they are also required to perform certain duties. It is these “duties”, or responsibilities, that people have in mind when they speak of *what citizens ought to be like* or *how they ought to behave*.

“Citizenship is a complex and multi-dimensional reality which needs to be set in its political and historical context. One cannot speak of citizenship in isolation, since the idea only has any meaning in relation to the real needs of society or a political system. Democratic citizenship, specifically, refers to the active participation by individuals in the system of rights and responsibilities which is the lot of citizens in democratic societies.<sup>5</sup>”

“Everyone is as God made him, and often a great deal worse.”

Miguel de Cervantes

“Put simply, a subject obeys the laws and a citizen plays a part in making and changing them.”

B. Crick.

However, if such a notion strikes us as too directorial or as limiting too much the inherent freedom and dignity of every individual citizen, then it is important to remember that these limits arise as a direct consequence of human rights theory. It is only the desire to build societies which respect the human rights of all citizens that imposes responsibilities on us all as citizens.

There are two immediate links between the responsibilities of citizenship and human rights theory:

1. The fact that every individual possesses basic human rights does not give anyone licence to behave exactly as he or she wishes. It only gives them licence to do so in so far as this does not impinge upon the human rights of other individuals. So one thing we can certainly say about good citizenship is that *it requires citizens to have respect for the human rights of others.*
2. The second close link with human rights concerns the way in which the concept of citizenship is essentially tied in with *membership of society.* We do not speak, for example, of citizens of desert islands, because a citizen is much more than just an *inhabitant* of a particular country or region. A citizen is essentially a member of the society which inhabits that region; so, if we are concerned to build societies which respect human rights, then this imposes another restriction on the way that individuals inhabiting that society should behave.

Thus, another thing that we could say about good citizenship would be that *it requires the type of behaviour that would lead society to be more respectful of human rights.*



**What should the citizen do when society is failing to respect the rights of certain sections of the community?**

### Problems with citizenship

Most of the debate today concerning citizenship is focused on the problem of increasing citizens' involvement and participation in the processes of democratic society. It is being increasingly realised that periodic voting by citizens is insufficient, either in terms of making those who govern in the interim period fully accountable or in promoting feelings of empowerment among ordinary citizens. Furthermore, even voting patterns themselves indicate levels of political apathy among the population that seriously undermine the effective functioning of democracy. It is with problems such as these in mind that programmes like the Council of Europe's Education for Democratic Citizenship have been initiated.



**What forms of involvement or participation, other than voting in elections, are possible for the ordinary citizen?**

A second set of issues which has possibly deserved less attention to date, but which is increasing in importance, concerns the question of those individuals who do not, for one reason or another, receive the full benefits of citizenship. One aspect of this is a result of continuing patterns of discrimination within societies: minority groups may very often have formal citizenship of the country in which they are living but may still be prevented from full participation in that society.

A second aspect of the problem is a consequence of increasing globalisation, including new patterns of work and migration, which leads to a significant number of people throughout the world being resident abroad but unable to apply for formal citizenship. Such people may include immigrant workers, refugees, temporary residents or even those who have decided to set up permanent residence in another country.

**?** What should be the criteria for citizenship in an increasingly multicultural world? Should immigrant workers be entitled to some of the benefits of citizenship, if not to formal citizenship?

**Education for democratic citizenship: the Council of Europe and youth**

The Council of Europe’s programme under this name has attempted to provide a European framework for the strengthening of education for democratic citizenship. The Council calls on member states to include such programmes within their educational, training, cultural and youth policies and practices, and it has itself worked actively to identify new strategies and approaches and to disseminate these.

The Draft Declaration and Programme on Education For Democratic Citizenship (April 1999) identified the following essential characteristics:

Education For Democratic Citizenship:

- constitutes a lifelong learning experience and a participative process developed in various contexts;
- equips men and women to play an active part in public life and to shape in a responsible way their own destiny and that of their society;
- aims to instil a culture of human rights which will ensure full respect for those rights and understanding of responsibilities that flow from them;
- prepares people to live in a multicultural society and to deal with difference knowledgeably, sensibly, tolerantly and morally;
- strengthens social cohesion, mutual understanding and solidarity;
- must be inclusive of all age groups and sectors of society.

One important aspect of the Programme on Education for Democratic Citizenship is that it is aimed at supporting various youth networks, partnerships, model initiatives, etc., in order to encourage young people to participate in civil society. Young people form an important part of the target population.

“I am impressed by the high number of young human rights activists here. Their knowledge and experience gives me confidence to continue our human rights education programme with schools and develop more out-of-school activities on learning citizenship<sup>6</sup>”

*Ms Marina Kovinena, Youth Human Rights Education Forum, 2000.*

**References**

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