



How Can Citizens Participate?



Earth Day: Every Day for Everybody



Grade Level: Middle School

Subject Correlation: Social Studies, Government

Objectives: Students will:

1. Learn about the different ways citizens can participate in a government
2. Learn to think critically about whether or not to participate and when

Length: One class period

Terms to Know

- citizen
- alien

Who is a citizen?

Anyone who is born in the United States or whose parents are U.S. citizens is a **citizen** of the United States. An **alien** is a person who is not a citizen. Many aliens can become citizens by following certain rules and procedures.

The government protects many rights for anyone who lives in the United States. But citizens have one right aliens do not have. That is the right to vote and be elected to public office. Many people say that citizens also have important responsibilities to their country that aliens do not. We will examine what those responsibilities might be in this lesson.

Problem solving

Examining participation

The Founders believed that the main purpose of government was to protect people's basic rights. Almost all citizens have the right to participate in governing our nation. They may choose among many different ways of doing this. Some ways to participate are listed below.



Your class should be divided into small groups. Each group should read the list of ways citizens can participate. Then each group should answer the following questions and share its responses with the class.

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each form of participation that is listed?
2. Are all these forms of participation equally important in protecting our basic rights? Why or why not? Which seem the most important?

Ways citizens can participate

- looking for information in newspapers, magazines, and reference materials and judging its accuracy
- voting in local, state, and national elections
- participating in a political discussion
- trying to persuade someone to vote a certain way
- signing a petition
- wearing a button or putting a sticker on the car
- writing letters to elected representatives
- contributing money to a party or candidate
- attending meetings to gain information, discuss issues, or lend support
- campaigning for a candidate
- lobbying for laws that are of special interest
- demonstrating through marches, boycotts, sit-ins, or other forms of protest
- serving as a juror
- running for office
- holding public office
- serving the country through military or other service
- disobeying laws and taking the consequences to demonstrate that a law or policy is unjust

Should citizens participate?

Many citizens do not participate in our government. They don't vote or participate in most of the other ways you have just discussed. However, some people believe that citizens have a responsibility to participate.

Deciding whether to participate and how much time to spend participating is important. To make good decisions, you must think about several things. Some of these are:

- the purpose of our government
- how important your rights are to you
- how satisfied you are with the way the government is working

An example may help. Imagine that you have hired a company to repair your bicycle. Before you hired them, you would want to be sure they could repair bicycles. Then you would want to make sure that they did what you had hired them to do. Suppose the company did a good job. Then you would not worry about checking on them if your sister's bicycle needed repairs a few weeks later.



Suppose the company did a bad job on your bicycle. Then you might want to replace them or watch them even more closely when your sister's bicycle needed work. The same is true with the government. We should be sure the people we "hire" (elect) can do the job we are hiring them for. Once they get the job, we should keep an eye on them to make sure they are doing that job. If they do a good job, we may not watch them as closely. If they do a bad job, we may watch them very closely and may even decide to replace them.

Participation in government is in our own self-interest. The amount of time we spend participating will probably depend on how well we think our elected officials are doing. If everything is going well, we will spend less time than if we are concerned that someone is violating our rights. If we are pleased with the government, we may vote and do little else. If we are dissatisfied, however, we will probably take other types of action.

Reviewing and using the lesson

1. How is citizen participation related to the purposes of our government? Explain why participating in government is in our own self-interest.
2. List three ways of participating in government. For each, tell why it would be an effective way of protecting your basic rights.
3. Suppose you do not choose to vote or participate in any way in government. Should you still be required to obey its laws? Why or why not?
4. If you do not think the government is protecting your basic rights, should you still be required to obey its laws? Explain your answer.
5. Does a good citizen have a responsibility to work to improve his or her society? Why or why not?
6. Should a good citizen be concerned with improving the lives of those less fortunate? Why or why not?

