

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Project Citizen



PURPOSE

This chapter provides brief descriptions of five concepts useful in describing and understanding the American political system. It also explains the goals of the Project Citizen program. When you have finished

this chapter, you should be able to explain the five concepts and their implications. You should also be able to explain and evaluate the goals of Project Citizen.

A What Five Concepts Are Useful in Describing and Understanding the American Political System?

- liberalism
- constitutionalism
- democracy
- republic
- federalism

Put them together and the American political system can be described as a liberal, constitutional, democratic republic with a federal system of government.

Liberalism The term “liberal” is derived from the term “liberty.” A liberal political system is one in which individual rights and freedoms are highly valued and protected. The Declaration of Independence states that “...all Men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed...” These words focusing on individual rights and freedoms are evidence of the liberal nature of the American political system.

It is important to understand that the term “liberal” has several different meanings. As it is used in this text, it refers to liberty and it should not be confused with the use of the term “liberal” when it is used as opposed to “conservative” positions on social, economic, or political matters.



Constitutionalism Ours is a “constitutional government” because the U.S. Constitution serves as a higher law that everyone must obey including those serving in government. Constitutional government is limited government. Through the Constitution the people delegate powers to their government to enable it to serve the purposes for which it was established.

The major purposes of our government are clearly set forth in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution. The responsibility of government to fulfill these purposes is the reason the People agreed to its establishment and continued operation, and also why the People agree to abide by the laws established by their government.



We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness — That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed

Declaration of Independence

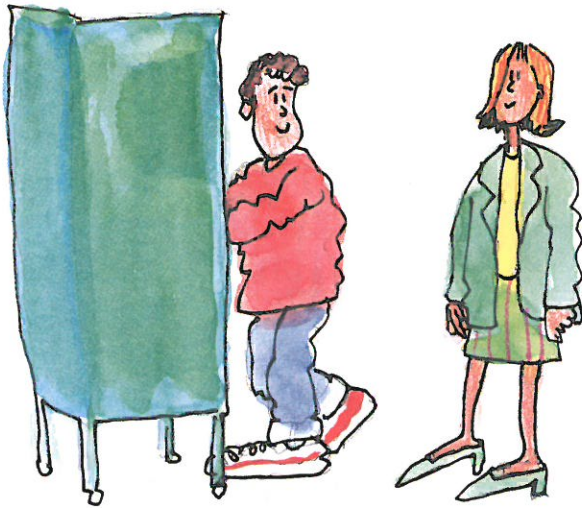
We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Preamble to the U.S. Constitution

Together the Declaration and the Preamble make it clear that the major purposes of our government are

- To secure the unalienable rights of individuals such as those to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness
- To establish justice
- To provide for individual security and public order
- To protect the people from harm from internal and external sources
- To provide for the general welfare

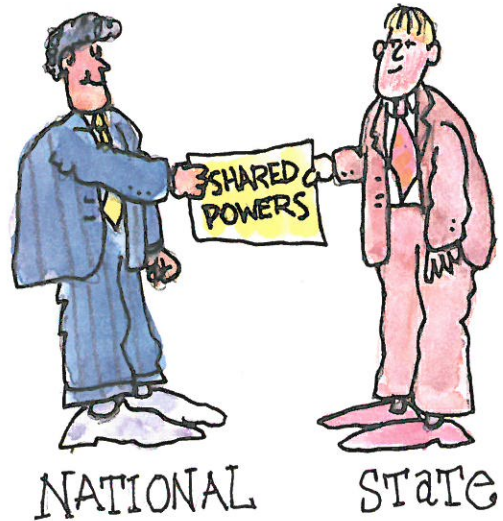




Democracy We are a “democracy” because we believe in the idea of “popular sovereignty.” Popular sovereignty means that the ultimate powers of government are held by the people who consent to delegate those powers to a government of their making, which they can alter or abolish, if it misuses or abuses the powers it has been delegated. We are also a democracy because all adult citizens, with few exceptions, can vote in free elections and hold public office.

Republic We are a “republic” (or a representative democracy) because in most cases decisions about government are made by representatives serving in governmental institutions rather than by direct vote of the people as would occur in a direct democracy.

Federalism We have a federal system of government (federalism) because power and responsibility are divided and shared between a national government having nationwide responsibilities and state and local governments having state and local responsibilities. This system provides



one means for limiting and checking the use of power because it is separated and shared among different levels of government. It is important to understand that the terms “democracy” and “republic” as used in this text refer to forms of government and not to the Democratic and Republican political parties in the United States.



B Class Activity — Demonstrating Understanding of Basic Concepts and Their Implications

Work with one or two other students to develop answers to the following questions. Then be prepared to present and discuss your answers with the entire class.

- 1 Give examples from the American political system of each of the five concepts that you have studied. What other terms or concepts might you use to describe the American political system?
- 2 What might be the advantages or disadvantages of each of the five concepts in protecting the rights of individuals?
- 3 In our democratic republic the people, through the U.S. Constitution and their state constitutions, have given the responsibility to make most



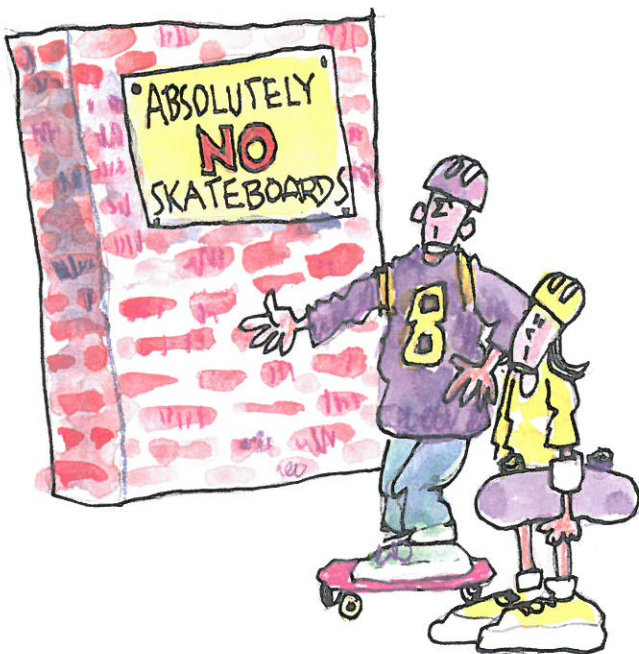
decisions about government to their representatives. Why, then, should individuals participate in their government? Should they have the right not to participate? Explain.

- 4 If individuals wish to participate, what tools do they need to participate competently and responsibly?

C What Are the Purposes of Project Citizen?

Because the United States is a democratic republic, most decision-making and other work of government is accomplished by elected and appointed representatives. However, it has been recognized since the founding of our nation that the preservation and healthy functioning of our democracy requires that citizens play an active role in what is ultimately a system of self-government. For citizens to play such a role requires, among other things, that they

- understand their system of government;
- have the knowledge, skills, and willingness to participate to an adequate degree; and





- participate guided by an enlightened, reasoned commitment to the fundamental values and principles of American democracy.

The principal purpose of Project Citizen is to help you to improve your capacities to participate competently and responsibly in the American political system. In addition to the requirements noted above, such participation requires that you have the capacity to keep track of, or monitor, what your government is doing and to influence it on matters of concern to you.

In a country as large and complex as the United States, monitoring and influencing government is not always an easy task. Our federal system includes three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial branches) each at federal, state, and local levels and numerous affiliated agencies. In fact, there are more than 87,000 governments and governmental agencies in the United States. This system is challenging to citizens who are often

confused about which level or levels of government and which branches or agencies of government are responsible for matters of interest to them.

Project Citizen provides a practical, first-hand approach to learning about our complex system of government and how to monitor and influence it. You will work together with other students in your class to conduct research in your community in order to discover problems that you think your governments are not handling at all or not handling well. Then you will select a problem from among those you have identified and work cooperatively to

- conduct research on the problem
- identify alternative solutions to the problem and weigh their advantages and disadvantages
- propose a solution to the problem that requires governmental action and does not violate provisions of your state and federal constitutions



- propose an action plan to influence the appropriate governmental agencies to consider or adopt your solution to the problem

Once these tasks are completed, you will record the results of your work on a portfolio and in a documentation binder. Then you will take part in a simulated public hearing in which you will present the results of your work to a panel of public and/or private sphere representatives of your community. If your class wishes to do so, you may also actively try to get government officials to consider or adopt the solutions to problems that you have proposed.

By taking part in Project Citizen, you will “learn by doing” the work of active citizens in your community. By completing your tasks, you should learn

- about the existence and roles of “civil society” (the sphere of voluntary activity in society) in the political process

- which branches, agencies, and levels of government have the authority and responsibility to deal with the problem you have chosen to work on
- how to monitor and influence the political process in your community, state, or nation

Although your attention may have been limited to one particular problem in your community or state, the knowledge and skills you gain are those required for competent and responsible participation throughout the American political system.

The sponsors of Project Citizen hope that the experiences and learning it fosters 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 of, by, and for the people, dedicated to liberty and justice for all, it is essential that the people take part in their system of self-government.



▣ What Opinions and Knowledge Do You Have About Participation in the Political Life of Your Community?

Before taking the next steps in Project Citizen, write your answers to the questions on Form 1. These questions ask for opinions about the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy and knowledge about participation and its consequences. After you have filled out the form, ask several adults how they would answer the questions and record their answers.

Bring your findings to class to share and discuss the responses you have gathered. Keep a record of your responses so you can compare your answers to the same questions after you have finished Project Citizen.