

Background Essay: What Does It Mean To Be a Citizen?

Directions

Read the essay and respond to the Review Questions at the end.

What Is a Citizen?

The term, “citizen” is related to the Latin term, *civitas*, meaning “city,” and referred in early times to an inhabitant of a city. In modern times it denotes a legally recognized member of a state who is entitled to certain rights and bears certain responsibilities. In the United States, our understanding of what it means to be a citizen comes from a number of influences that predate the U.S. Constitution, which did not initially define citizenship, but left it to each of the states to determine the qualifications for participation in government. To the ancient Greeks, a citizen was a member of the community who participates in public affairs through informed, reasoned debate and discussion, respectfully considering the views of others. Aristotle taught that a citizen is capable of both ruling and being ruled through active participation in deliberation and decision-making. In the Roman Republic, *civitas* consisted of those city residents who were educated and had the right to vote and hold office. Ideally, they exercised moderation and good judgment by voting for the good of the people, sharing in the rights and responsibilities of self-government.

Why did the Founders think virtue is necessary?

Building on this underpinning, the Founders of the United States took the position that citizens

must exercise certain knowledge, skills, dispositions, and virtues in self-government. Among the many observations of Founders regarding the important role of a citizen are the following:

- John Adams wrote, “Public virtue cannot exist in a nation without private [virtue], and public virtue is the only foundation of republics.” John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, April 16, 1776
- Benjamin Franklin wrote, “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become more corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters.” Letter to Messrs, the Abbes Chalut, and Arnaud, April 17, 1787
- James Madison stated: “To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical [imaginary] idea.” Speech in the Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 20, 1788
- Madison also wrote, “As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. [America’s republican form of government] presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.” (*Federalist No. 55*, 1788).

- Thomas Jefferson wrote: “Convinced that the people are the only safe depositories of their own liberty, and that they are not safe unless enlightened to a certain degree, I have looked on our present state of liberty as a short-lived possession unless the mass of the people could be informed to a certain degree.” Letter to Littleton Waller Tazewell, 1805

Ratified in 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution provides the legal definition of U.S. citizenship, stating, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and the State wherein they reside.” For purposes of this study, we will use the following description:

A citizen in a free society is a person who functions privately and publicly according to principles of moral and ethical excellence essential to leading a worthwhile life and to effective self-government. A citizen seeks to be active in public life, demonstrating civic virtues in everyday life and solving community problems.

What virtues are necessary in a free society, and who is responsible for cultivating them among the citizens?

If citizens are to be free, how is it appropriate for government to be concerned about character formation? What does it mean to be free? The Founders believed that all humans are born with certain natural rights, and that legitimate government is based on the will of the people

expressed through the laws they make for themselves through their representatives. Self-government in civil society depends on certain attributes of character, but the government is not the primary institution responsible for inculcating those virtues. Rather, generating the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions is primarily the responsibility of families. The first and most powerful influences on character come from experiences and expectations learned in the family setting. In the endeavor to develop decent human beings who know how to work with one another, solve problems, and resolve disputes productively, families are supported by private institutions such as religious institutions and civic associations. Government plays a secondary role in encouraging these qualities in a variety of ways, including through its provision of tax-supported community schools.

There are many virtues that contribute to civil society, but the Founders’ public and private writings tell us that many of them understood at least the following attributes of character to be necessary: **justice, responsibility, courage, moderation, respect, initiative, honor, perseverance, self-reliance, and civic knowledge.**

To preserve freedom citizens must first understand what **justice** is and have the **courage** to assert themselves when their rights or the rights of others are violated. If individuals are to be free, they must exercise **self-reliance** and **responsibility** to provide for themselves and their families. They must also **respect** others enough to behave generously when other community members face hardship. Another outgrowth of respect for others is that individuals exercise **moderation** in their thoughts and actions in order to listen and engage in civil discourse. Communities built on

this foundation also require individuals who apply **initiative** to act energetically in solving problems, **perseverance** because problems often do not yield to easy solutions, and **honor** so that people can trust one another to do the right thing. **Civic knowledge** is necessary so that people understand their rights and can act with wisdom based on evidence and reason. In addition to applying these virtues in their own lives, citizens must hold their elected officials accountable to these standards. Seeking to serve the public in a representative office is a heavy responsibility, and voters must exercise vigilance and wisdom as they mark their ballots.

What principles guided the Founders in establishing the structure of the U.S. Constitution?

Based on their long and diligent study of the kinds of governments that been established in human history, Founders like James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Wilson, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, and George Mason, urged that certain principles must be incorporated in the framework of government in order for it to do its main job, which was protecting the natural rights of the citizens. Those principles of constitutional government

included **rule of law** and **due process**, the idea that government and citizens alike abided by the same laws regardless of political power, and that those laws must reflect the virtue of justice. Because all humans are born with **equal and inalienable rights**, no one is born with a natural right to rule over others, so legitimate government is based on the principle of **consent of the governed**. In a large and complex society, the principle of consent is generally expressed through the principle of **republicanism** (or representation) as the people entrust to certain elected officials the responsibilities of day-to-day decision-making regarding law and policy. Because humans are flawed and disposed to increase their own power at the expense of others, Founders believed it is important to preserve the principle of **limited government** through a complex structure of enumerated, divided, **shared powers** and **checks and balances**.

The Founders knew that the preservation of liberty would not be easy; it is often difficult for flawed human beings to engage productively with one another to live peaceably in community. And they also knew that the American experiment in self-government had no chance to succeed without these constitutional principles, as well as personal and civic virtues.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Using the definitions of “citizen” in the **first** paragraph of the essay, write your own definition of what it means to be a citizen.
2. Which of the Founders’ quotes in the **second** paragraph do you believe is most important for citizens to understand today? Be prepared to explain your answer.
3. Why do institutions like government, religious institutions, and voluntary organizations play a secondary, or supporting, role in developing strength of character, compared to the primary role of family?
4. Of the specific virtues listed in the essay, select the three or four that you think are most important, and be prepared to explain your opinion.
5. Of the specific principles described in the essay, select one or two that you believe are most important and be prepared to explain your opinion.
6. Paraphrase and evaluate the following quote from an essay that Samuel Adams wrote at the age of 27 in 1749. Was Adams correct, partially correct, or incorrect? Defend your answer.

“Neither the wisest constitution nor the wisest laws will secure the liberty and happiness of a people whose manners are universally corrupt. He therefore is the truest friend of the liberty of his country who tries most to promote its virtue.” Samuel Adams, Essay in *The Public Advertiser*, 1749