

Citizenship and Public Policy: An Introduction

Voting is just a small part of your role as a citizen. Effective citizens participate not only at the voting booth, but by taking notice of, learning about, and working to solve problems that affect their community, state, or nation. Effective citizens engage in dialogue and civil discourse with each other and their elected officials and attend civic meetings to voice their concerns and discuss solutions to the issues most important to them.

Most challenges faced by a community or state are resolved by policies, set by governments, aimed at addressing the perceived issue. A policy is a rule or course of action set by a government, outlining how an issue will be addressed. When the government decides there's a problem that needs addressing, they set a policy to try and resolve the problem. Sometimes this can mean creating a new policy, changing or eliminating an existing one, or changing how an existing policy is enforced. Of course, a lack of policy is a decision too: a decision to not deal with the perceived issue.

Areas where local and state leaders set policies that affect your life include: education, attracting jobs and businesses to improve the economy, reducing crime, helping individuals who are struggling or in need, reducing litter and pollution, creating or protecting opportunities for recreation, building or improving transportation and other infrastructure, healthcare, protecting the environment or wildlife, and many more. For instance, as a student, you may take issue with some of the rules and policies set by your school and district. That doesn't mean the rules and policies are wrong, or that everyone will agree with you, but as a citizen it's right to care about problems you perceive and work to improve them.

As no citizen has the time to take on every issue, that's why we elect and employ representatives! Citizens can decide to spend time working to implement changes in areas that are most important to them. Here are some questions to ask yourself when you think about problems to fix:

What issues touch my life?

What issues affect the people in my community?

What issues are most urgent and in need of fixing?

What issues am I most interested in?

What issues do I have the best chance to affect or change?

Caring about, and taking a stand on a community problem is civic engagement. Wanting to impact a policy to make a positive difference is civic engagement. To do so, you need to be able to convince others that the problem, issue, or policy you want to work on is important.