

Civic and Political Participation in Early American History

From the earliest beginnings of colonization, Americans highly valued their ability to engage in the political process. Based on English traditions of liberties and beliefs in limited government, colonists viewed participation in representative government (consenting to their governance) as one of their most fundamental rights and duties.

This practice grew more intense in response to British tax policy following the French and Indian War (1754-1763). In what would come to be called the Revolutionary Era, American colonists protested their ever-growing displeasure with the British Crown in a number of ways.



Historic pamphlet from the Library of Congress

Pamphlet Production

One way was publishing **pamphlets**, or small printed booklets. Pamphlets were among the first printed works and, in the age before television, the internet, or social media, were vital for communication and sharing information and ideas. Pamphlets covered all ranges of topics, from weather and planting advice to politics, and flew off the presses as the British colonies moved towards independence.

Boycotting

Another form of civic participation that colonists engaged in were **boycotts**. A boycott is the act of abstaining from a product, person, company, or even from entering or trading with a country, as a form of nonviolent protest. A boycott can involve a refusal to buy a good or service or to associate with some person or entity to voice disapproval of that entity's policies or practices. By inflicting economic loss, the person boycotting hopes to force the entity to change their behavior.

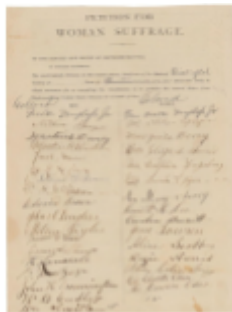


Colonists boycotting during the Boston Tea Party

Boycotts can be organized or solitary. Often those engaging in boycotts seek to persuade others to join as well. Boycotts occupy an important place in American history as a means to voice displeasure and force change, with boycotts of British goods among the earliest acts of organized resistance to British tax policy in the colonies following the French and Indian War.

Petitioning

A third form of active participation was **petitioning** King George III and parliament. The dictionary defines a petition as "a formal written request, typically one signed by many people, appealing to authority with respect to a particular cause".



Petition for women's suffrage

Petitioning often occurs through citizens writing a document about an issue and collecting signatures in support of the document to show the government how many citizens support the request.

The right to petition is so important it's now one of the freedoms listed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In general, the idea of petitioning the government means any nonviolent, legal means of encouraging or disapproving government action, directed to the legislative, executive, or judicial branch. Signing a petition is still common today.

Civil Disobedience

All of these forms of political participation continued, grew, and changed after independence. In the era before the Civil War, an increasingly common form of political participation became **civil disobedience**. Civil disobedience is the active refusal to obey the laws, demands, or commands of a government or occupying power, without resorting to violence or active measures of opposition. Since it is nonviolent, civil disobedience can share some similarities with peaceful protest.



The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington challenged segregation

Civil disobedience can be collective or solitary, but always involves breaking laws that one's conscience tells them are unjust or immoral. Civil disobedience became especially common in response to federal laws such as the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, and in favor of *temperance*, or the prohibition of alcohol. Because it involves breaking laws, civil disobedience can often result in criminal or civil charges and penalties.

Staying Informed



Former President Kennedy giving a speech to the public

Not all forms of political participation are confrontational. One of the most basic forms involves simply staying informed. In the era before mass communications, Americans did this by reading newspapers, and attending **civic meetings** and **speeches** by local and national politicians.

Some civic meetings, such as school board or city council meetings, provide you with an opportunity to meet face-to-face with your government leaders, become informed on important local issues, and have your voice heard about what is important to you. Other civic meetings take the form of national conventions where citizens organize towards a cause that's important to them.

Before television and radio, Americans frequently turned out to hear speeches from politicians, with important speeches often being published afterwards by newspapers to reach even more Americans.



Voting



Of course, the most basic form of political participation, and the one that protects your right to do all the others, remains **voting**. By voting, you get to say what's important to you, and you say it straight to the elected leaders. Elections are one of the few times when adults, 18 years old and older, all have an equal say. Even if the person you vote for loses, your vote matters because it lets winners and losers know who supports their points of view.

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