

# Political and Civic Participation

In Philadelphia, in the summer of 1787, delegates from the thirteen states established the government that is still in place today. While they carefully weighed how power should be divided, and debated every detail from representation to the inclusion of a bill of rights, they understood that actually creating the Constitution was just the first and the easiest task of what would be an ongoing experiment. History has seen some powerful and successful governments meet their demise...could this constitutional republic stand the test of time? One thing the Framers did know was that if the republic was to last, successive generations of Americans must remain engaged.

Though our nation has changed greatly over the past two and a half centuries, the various ways citizens can engage politically and civically would look very familiar to the Founders.

## Participation Methods

### Voting

Elections are a unique opportunity for all citizens, regardless of wealth or background, to make their voices equally heard. Government at all levels sets policies and makes decisions that affect you, your loved ones, your community, your state, and the nation as a whole. By voting, you have the opportunity to express your priorities and opinions directly to elected representatives and leaders. Even if your preferred candidate doesn't win, your vote matters as it lets the winners and losers know how much support their viewpoints hold. For close elections, this can signal that the winning side should look to compromise with the losing side on issues, while a big victory signals the winners' strong support for their agenda. Voting is a central responsibility of citizenship.



### Communicating With Public Officials

After elections, citizens must continue to engage with elected representatives to indicate support or opposition for the decisions in front of them. This may be done through completing surveys, writing to public officials, or scheduling meetings to discuss issues. Attending civic meetings, such as school board or city council meetings, also allows you to stay informed and speak face-to-face with your local elected leaders. Making your voice heard about what is important to you helps your elected leaders know how best to represent you.



### Using Your First Amendment Rights

Four of the rights protected by the First Amendment play an important role in civic and political participation: freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom to petition, freedom to assemble. Petitioning your government means any nonviolent and legal methods of communicating with your elected leaders and representatives. While writing an actual petition to an elected leader is one common way to do this, any contact with an elected representative that expresses your approval or disapproval, encouragement, concern, asks for help, or asks for things to change is considered a petition. Assembly refers to the right of



individuals to come together with others and collectively express, promote, pursue, and defend common interests. No matter which of the freedoms exercised, the U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed that people are protected when they bring to the government's attention their unresolved concerns, provide information to political leaders about unpopular policies and issues, and expose government misconduct.

### Political Campaigns

Survival of the constitutional republic relies on caring and concerned citizens going into public service by running for office and serving in government. In the United States, citizens can run for local, state, or national office. By running for office, you have the chance to set priorities that are important to you, shape your community, your state, or the nation as a whole, as well as represent the people who voted you into office. Political campaigns also need the support of individuals *not* interested in service to support the candidates. This participation may be a monetary contribution, volunteering time to wave signs, wearing a shirt or button in support, or engaging in civil discourse with potential voters.



### Community Service

Probably one of the simplest and most common ways citizens can engage is through service to the local community. Local community may mean your school, city, or state. Part of being a community member is helping to fix problems or improve life for the overall community. One way to do this is by giving your time, efforts, and/or talents to providing community service.

### Staying Informed

Using any method to engage politically or civically becomes more effective when the individuals participating are well-informed. For example, knowing about political candidates and their stances on issues would allow you to be a more well-informed voter. Gathering as much information about a problem and possible solutions would make you a well-informed speaker at a civic meeting. It is important that when staying informed, citizens seek out trusted and reliable sources and examine all sides.



### Limitations on Participation

Though the U.S. Constitution contains broad guarantees of citizens' right to participate in our nation's political and civic life, individuals can be denied or limited in their right to participate in several ways and for different reasons.

### Felon Voting Rights

Historically, it has been common for convicted felons to lose their right to vote, sometimes permanently. As states set requirements for voting, restoration of voting rights is a state-by-state decision up to the legislature of the state in question. Some states automatically restore voting rights upon release; some include any time for post-incarceration parole and probation onto the

time during which voting is restricted. Lastly, a few states require some additional action following release, such as the paying of all court fees or action on the part of the governor for voting rights to be restored.

### **Campaign Contributions**

Another limitation involves political campaign contributions. Among other things, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) sets limits on contributions that individuals can make to political campaigns. The motivation for this is to limit the potential for a select individual or individuals to become too influential on a political candidate. It allows the playing field to remain more even.

### **Protesting**

While the First Amendment protects many ways for citizens to engage politically and civically, those rights are not limitless. While citizens can and should engage in peaceable assembly, there are limitations on the type of protesting that can occur. For instance, local governments can require permits depending on the location of the protest and its potential for disruption to traffic or commerce. Protests also cannot include lawless action or incitement to violence.

#### **Image Credits**

“[Minneapolis City Council Budget Hearing](#)” by Tony Webster is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

“[woman with curly hair protesting with megaphone](#)” by Freepik is licensed under the [Freepik license](#)

“[People registering to vote in the United States](#)” by Freepik is licensed under the [Freepik license](#)

“[High angle man reading digital magazine](#)” by Freepik is licensed under the [Freepik license](#)

“[People protesting with placard in the city for world environment day](#)” by Freepik is licensed under the [Freepik license](#)

“[Group of different people volunteering at a foodbank for poor people](#)” by Freepik is licensed under the [Freepik license](#)