

8 What does it take to be a good citizen?



Usually when people talk about being a good citizen, the first thing that comes up is voting. That's because voting is the most basic act of citizenship. When immigrants become citizens, they nearly always take great pride in being able to vote. They are right to feel this way. There's really nothing more important than the act of marking a ballot and making an informed choice about how we want to shape our future, and who we want to lead us.

But voting is only part of the story. In fact, government is only a part of the story. To be good citizens, we have to think about the whole of our lives – about how we treat the people around us, how well we take care of the natural world, and what impact all our actions will have on the future.

To live in an open, democratic society, we have to accept that not everyone will share our beliefs. (When a society includes and embraces people who have a variety of backgrounds and beliefs, it's called *pluralism*.) In fact, it helps if we all enjoy this diversity. If we only spend time with people who think and act just like us, we would never hear about new ideas that might be better than our own. In the long history of human civilization, the most progress has always been made when people are exposed to new ideas, new ways of looking at things, and new insights – even if those new ways of thinking seem disturbing or difficult to understand at first.

But voting and being open to new ideas are just the beginning. Being a good citizen also requires striving to develop certain habits of mind and ways of living. Here's one list of traits and habits that contribute to good citizenship. You may think of others that should be added:

☐ Try to be a person of good character.

Good people make good citizens. Being a good person means always trying to be kind and honest, to pay attention to other people's needs, to respect yourself and others, and to work hard. None of us is perfect, so we also need to cultivate the habit of facing up to our faults and striving to overcome them.

☐ Love to learn.

The best way to help make the world a better place is to keep learning all you can about it. Knowledge is power. For instance, the more we know about salmon, rivers, and oceans, the more likely we will be able to save both the salmon and the natural world that sustains us.

☐ Learn science.

In the 21st century, scientific discoveries will change our world in ways we can't yet understand. To make sure these changes benefit all of us, we will need citizens who understand science and can govern the way we use it.

☐ Don't feel you have to know everything.

No one knows everything. It's important to understand the big ideas and principles of democracy, but if you don't remember all the details about which court does what, or how many people are on a city council, don't worry. You can re-learn those facts when you need them.

☐ Get to know your neighbors.

Democracy depends on people having a sense of community. When neighbors know each other and help each other, they are more likely to participate in activities that make their neighborhoods safer, better places for kids to grow up to be good people.

☐ Participate in the life of your community.

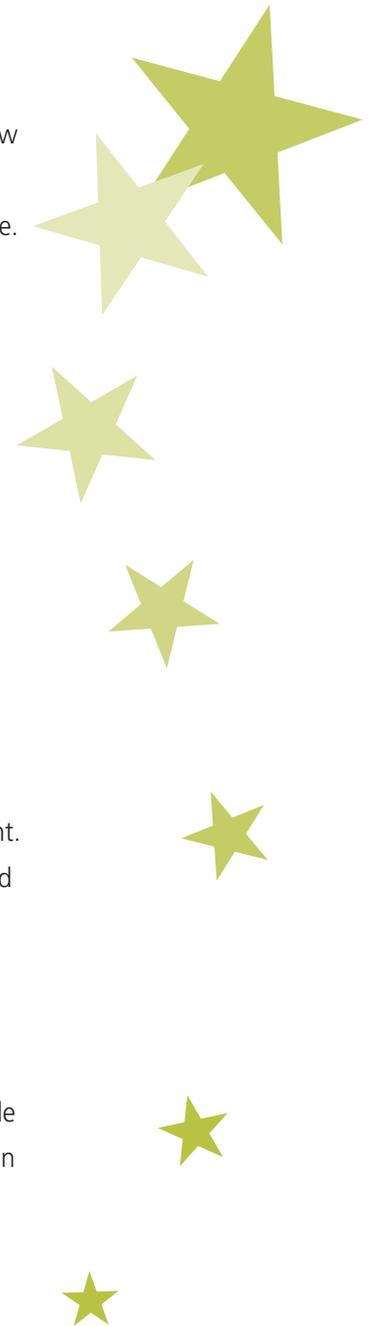
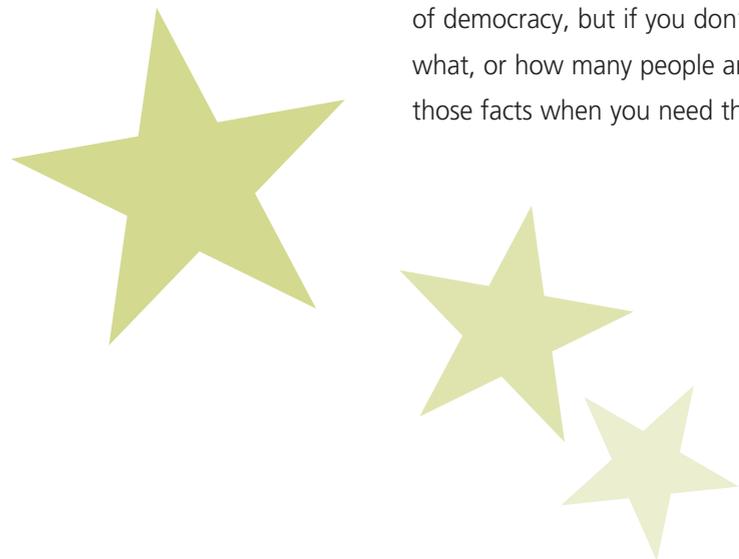
There are lots of activities that help democracy without really even involving politics or elections. Charities, religious groups, sports leagues, book clubs and arts organizations all contribute to making communities healthy places to live. This supports the work of government by helping us be a civilized society where people know how to get along with one another.

☐ Think about the common good, and about individual liberty.

As human beings, we are all constantly trying to find the right balance between doing what we want to do, and doing what's best for the people around us. This is true in our family lives, in our schools, in our workplaces, and in our government. Being a good citizen requires thinking carefully about what's best for all of us, and what's best for each of us.

☐ Lean towards optimism.

To make democracy succeed, we have to share the belief that human beings are capable of resolving differences peacefully, respecting each other, and putting aside selfish interests. But when people do things that are mean, corrupt, or hateful, it can make all of us wonder if democracy really works. When this happens, we have to remind ourselves of the progress our country has made. We have to stay focused on living up to the ideals in our constitution.



❑ Think of yourself as a very powerful person.

You are. As a citizen of the world's only superpower, each American has more political power than a hundred citizens of a smaller, less prosperous democratic country – and thousands of times more powerful than citizens who live under corrupt or undemocratic governments. When we vote for President, we are voting for someone who will have an impact all over the world – not just on our fellow Americans. This is an enormous responsibility.

❑ Question authority.

In fact, question everything. Democracy depends on people asking hard questions, and insisting on honest answers. If this country's founders hadn't questioned the authority of the British, we would still be curtsying to the Queen of England.

❑ Don't waste time hating government.

Lots of people will tell you that government is no darn good, and that it wastes tax dollars and interferes with people's lives. Or they might say government is no darn good because it's all controlled by big-money interests and corporations. These statements may point out problems that need to be solved, but they sure don't help solve them. Complaining about something doesn't change it. And in a democracy, hating the government is a kind of self-hatred, because we're the ones who elect our government leaders.

❑ Keep the faith.

What makes democracy work is that we all believe in it. If people stop believing in it, it will die. All the progress our country has made – from outlawing slavery to extending voting rights to everyone to making the 40-hour workweek a legal standard – happened because people believed that they could create change. They were right.