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## Chapter Eleven

# Practicing Citizenship

*Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, said that democracy is a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”*

*You are the people! You have a right and a responsibility to participate.*

### In this Chapter:

- What is Civic Participation?
- Civic Participation Activities Before Naturalization
- Voting
- Serving on a Jury
- Serving on Government Boards and Commissions
- Running for Office



### ***Active Citizenship: Your Right and Responsibility.***

Becoming a citizen opens up new possibilities for civic participation. Taking the oath of citizenship is an important step on your journey to becoming an *active citizen*. Also, there are many ways you can participate in civic life – in a democracy – before you become a citizen. This chapter looks at different ways you can be engaged in civic life *before* and *after* you become a citizen.

## WHAT IS CIVIC PARTICIPATION?

Civic participation is activity benefiting many people, beyond oneself, in a local community or a nation. Civic participation arises from a hope for a better future. It requires a commitment of time, talent, and resources. Participation can be through loosely organized individuals working together or through institutions that govern public life. You can become involved in civic participation activities as an individual or through different kinds of groups, such as home-country associations, nonprofit organizations, and tenants associations. Whatever you choose to do, it involves people working together to solve problems and help shape the future of their community or nation.

*See Attachment A for a learning activity.*

Examples of civic participation activities are:

- organizing or participating in neighborhood meetings, clean-ups, or cultural festivals;
- volunteering with a community-based nonprofit organization;
- participating in a local religious group (church, temple, or mosque);
- joining a civic or community group;
- raising money for a local charity;
- attending city council meetings;
- giving testimony at public hearings;
- participating in meetings or forums to discuss community issues;
- writing to a newspaper (such as a letter to the editor);
- writing or calling your elected officials to give them your opinion on an issue;
- taking part in rallies, marches, or vigils;
- volunteering for a political candidate;
- voting and registering others to vote; and
- running for elected office.



candidate = A person who seeks or is nominated for an elected position of office.

## Where Does Your Right to Civic Participation Come From?

Your right to participate in the civic life of the United States comes from the Constitution and the first ten amendments to the Constitution known as the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights reads:

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”*

The First Amendment says that the government cannot interfere with your right to free speech, to a free press, to come together peacefully with others, and to petition the government to correct a wrong. This means that you have a right to voice your concerns to an elected official, start or join an advocacy organization, and organize a rally or public meeting in support of your cause.

## Why Participate in Civic Life?

Why should *you* participate in civic life? Because finding solutions to common concerns – from neighborhood crime to polluted water – takes everyone’s ideas and efforts. You should participate because:

- you have important ideas, experiences, and skills to contribute;
- you are best able to represent the needs and concerns of immigrant communities, not someone from outside your community;
- your voice needs to be heard by decision-makers so they will make good decisions for your community;
- you believe it is important to create a better future for the next generation; and
- last but not least... you will learn new skills and have fun!

In the long run, the strength of the United States depends on the civic participation of newcomers and new citizens.



petition = To make a formal written request to an official person or government body.  
interfere = To hinder or prevent something from happening.

## CIVIC PARTICIPATION ACTIVITIES BEFORE NATURALIZATION

### How Can You Participate in Civic Life *Before* Becoming a Citizen?

To participate in some civic activities, such as voting, you must be a citizen. But there are many ways you can participate and have a voice in the decisions that affect your daily life *before* you become a citizen. Civic participation begins with a belief that you have something important to offer. You have time, talents, money, ideas, experiences, and relationships with other people.

Perhaps you already contribute to the civic life of your ethnic community by participating in mutual assistance-type associations. You might be involved with a funeral association, a soccer league, a dance troupe, a senior association, or a business group. You can also participate in the civic groups, organizations, and institutions – from government agencies to tenant associations, business leagues, and neighborhood groups – that affect the lives and livelihoods of *all* Americans, including immigrants.

*See Attachment B for a list of activities organizations can do.*

**Case Story:** African taxi drivers in Washington, D.C., some of whom are citizens but many of whom are not, have been learning how to make their voices heard in many different ways. They formed an association to advocate with the City Council on policies affecting taxi drivers. During the 2004 national elections and the 2006 local elections, the taxi drivers organized to offer free transportation to the voting polls for African immigrant seniors. As one taxi driver who participated in this civic activity commented, *“I’m not eligible to be a citizen yet so I cannot vote, but by giving people from the community free rides to make sure they were able to go and vote, I could still participate in democracy. It was simple for me... it’s all about our democratic rights.”*

## Communicating with Elected Officials and Other Decision Makers

One important way to participate is to use your first amendment right to freedom of speech by communicating with elected officials and other decision makers. You can do this through letters, e-mails, phone calls, or in-person visits. Again, you can do this as an individual or as a group. It may be more comfortable and less scary to speak out as a group.

*See Attachment C for a sample advocacy letter.*

Elected officials represent *all* of the people who live within their jurisdiction, not just the people who voted for them. However, your message is more influential when you can say, *“This is what I think ... and I vote!”*

### ***Hints for an Effective Advocacy Letter***

An effective letter to an elected official or other decision maker should be brief and to the point. Make sure to:

- state who you are and where you live (it’s important to identify yourself as a member of the elected official’s jurisdiction);
- state briefly why you are writing;
- identify the issue you are concerned about and how it affects your community;
- share a short story or example about how the issue affects you personally;
- make your request (explain what you want the elected official to do); and
- thank the person for his/her support of your community.



jurisdiction = The geographic area that an elected official represents.

## **How to Contact Elected Officials**

You can find the exact address, phone number, fax, e-mail, and home page of your elected officials on the Project Vote Smart website at <http://www.vote-smart.org/>. Click on the tab that says, "Officials." Below are the mailing addresses for the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the White House.

Senator \_\_\_\_\_  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Representative \_\_\_\_\_  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20510

President \_\_\_\_\_  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500  
Phone: (202) 456-1414 Fax: (202) 456-2883  
e-mail: [president@whitehouse.gov](mailto:president@whitehouse.gov)  
home page: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>

## **Now You Are a Citizen ... What Else Can You Do?**

There are many ways that you can be involved in civic life before you become a citizen. However, there are important activities you can only do if you are a citizen such as voting, serving on a jury, serving on certain boards and commissions, and running for elected office. Each activity for citizens is described on the following pages.

## VOTING

### Why Should You Vote?

Elected officials make important decisions that affect your life and issues that are important to you. When you vote, you are stating your preference for the kinds of decisions and policies you want to see. By voting, you can hold elected officials accountable to your community.

Elected officials are more likely to listen to people who are registered to vote and who vote. So, when you speak out as a registered voter – and you vote—then your voice is more likely to be heard!

### Why You Have a Right to Vote

The right to vote was expanded to *all citizens* over the age of 18, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, through four amendments to the Constitution. However, even after these amendments were passed, state officials created barriers to voting for certain groups, especially African Americans, by requiring voters to pass a literacy test or charging a special tax to vote. Through civic participation – including marches, rallies, and boycotts – citizens, particularly African Americans, helped win the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This law made it illegal to prevent people from voting. This act also states that language assistance must be provided at the polls for counties that have a certain percentage of minority language speakers.



*The Vietnamese seniors in our community all go vote together on Election Day. They love to vote. They say, "Now we are Americans and when we vote, we speak up for our community."*

accountable = Having to answer to or explain one's actions to a person or group of people.

## Which Elections Should You Vote In?

In the United States, elections take place at the national, state, and local levels. Elected officials at these levels make decisions that affect people's lives in many important ways. For this reason, *all elections* are important to a democracy.

At the national level, you can vote for the President and for your members of Congress (Senators and Representatives). These national elected officials make decisions such as:

- how much you pay in federal taxes;
- how much money the government will spend on health care and other human services;
- which relatives you can sponsor as immigrants;
- what will be the future of Social Security;
- how clean our air and water should be;
- how much money we provide in aid to foreign countries; and
- when and why we should go to war.

At the state and local levels, you can vote for your governor, state legislators, city and county council members, mayor, and school board representatives. These state and local officials make many of decisions that affect your local community, including:

- how much you pay in local taxes;
- how much money will be spent on public schools, affordable housing, and child care;
- how many police officers will protect the public;
- what the penalties will be for different kinds of crimes;
- what kind of public transportation will be available; and
- how much public space your city has and how it can be used.

Remember that voting is about having a voice in your future and the future of your family and community. It is your most important right as a new citizen.

*I decided to become a citizen just so I could vote in local elections. I saw so many things happening in my city that I didn't agree with, and I wanted my views to be counted. I knew that by helping choose who becomes the mayor and who gets on the city council – by voting – I could help bring about changes.*

## What's the Difference Between *Primary* and *General* Elections?

In a *primary* election, the voters choose a candidate to represent a political party later in a *general* election for that office, such as mayor, governor, senator, or president. In the primaries, voters choose only from the set of candidates running within a particular party, whether Democratic, Republican, or an independent party. In some states, you can only vote in the primary if you have joined a political party. In others, you can decide on election day which party's primary you would like to vote in.

The general election follows the primary and is open to all registered voters regardless of party affiliation. In the general election, you can vote for any candidate from any party, but you can only select one candidate for each political office.

*When I first became a citizen, I did not vote. I didn't know what to do and I was scared to ask. But when the next election came, I asked a friend if I could go with her and she showed me how to vote. She showed me that voting is easy. Now, I vote in every election.*



## What Happens on Election Day?

After registering to vote, here are some things you can do to prepare for Election Day:

- **Know where you go to vote.** A polling place, also called a polling station, is where you and your neighbors go to vote. Polling places are divided by the precinct where you live. A precinct is a division of a community. Your precinct number is printed on your voter registration card. If you are still not sure where to vote, you can ask your neighbors or call your county election official, often called the County/Municipal Clerk or Supervisor of Elections.
- **Know what time the polls open and close.** Each city, county, or state determines what time the polls open in the morning and close in the evening.
- **Talk to your employer.** Make sure you speak to your employer in advance to see if you can take time off work to vote. Nearly all states have laws requiring employers to allow employees to take time off to vote.
- **Bring a valid ID with you.** In all states, you must present a valid identification card to vote.
- **Learn about the candidates and issues.** It is important to be an informed voter. For more information, see below.
- **Bring information you want to take into the polls.** You can bring a voter's guide with you that lists the candidates' positions on issues to help you remember your choices in candidates.

When you go to vote, you will be given a ballot that lists the candidates for different elected offices and the issues you can vote on. All states elect certain offices such as governor, senator, and attorney general. However, some positions, such as judges, are elected in some states and appointed in others. You record your choices on the ballot, and then “cast,” or put, your ballot in a box at the polling place.

In some elections, you might also have the opportunity to vote on a particular issue, such as raising taxes for a new school building. These are called referendums, propositions, or ballot initiatives. In these elections, you are asked to vote “yes” or “no” for the proposed tax or law. In some states, if the majority of people vote “yes” it will become a law. In others, it is only a recommendation to the state elected officials that they consider the people's voice.

ballot = Usually a piece of pre-printed paper that lists the candidates for different elected offices and the issues you can vote on. You record your choices on the ballot.

appointed = Selected by an elected official.

## What If You Need Special Assistance?

Voters who need special assistance because they have a physical or mental disability, are unable to read or write, or have limited English proficiency may request an accommodation. If you need special assistance, you can ask when you arrive at your polling place or call in advance to make your request. Some examples of voting accommodations are:

- large print ballots;
- braille ballots;
- assistance in reading or marking your ballot;
- having the ballot brought to your car;
- wheelchair accessibility; and
- bilingual ballots (ballots printed in multiple languages) or other bilingual language assistance.

Bilingual language assistance is available to voters in communities where there is a concentration of citizens who are limited English proficient. Ballots are most commonly translated into Spanish and Chinese, but Los Angeles County, for example, prints its ballots in seven languages.



accommodation = An adjustment that is made to meet special needs in order to ensure participation in an activity.

## What If You Cannot Get to the Polls on Election Day?

There are several options:

- **Absentee Voting.** You can get an *absentee ballot* if you expect to be away from your precinct on voting day, or if you are ill, elderly, disabled, or prevented from going to the polling place due to a religious holiday. Absentee voting is done by mail. You can get an absentee ballot by calling, writing, or going to your county election official, often called the County/Municipal Clerk or Supervisor of Elections. You must apply for the ballot a certain number of days before the election, usually 30 days, and return the ballot by a deadline.
- **Early Voting.** In some places, you can vote *before* the election, for example if you know you will be busy or out of town on Election Day. You do not need to give an excuse to vote early.
- **Voting Outside of the United States.** When you are leaving the United States for a short period of time, you can get an absentee ballot. If you will be living outside of the United States for a longer period of time or will be abroad in military service, you can vote using your last address in the country. Contact a county voting office and ask for a Federal Postcard Application (FPCA), Form 76-114. This is a voter registration and absentee ballot request combined. This will allow you to vote absentee for one year. Each year you must reapply.



*The first time I voted, I knew it was important, but I didn't know anything about the issues they asked us to vote on. After the election, I found out that I had voted for something I didn't even want! I learned that I should figure things out first, and then vote. Now I make sure to read up on the issues and check the Internet before I vote.*

## How Can You Learn About the Candidates and Issues?

You can learn about the candidates and their positions on issues using different sources of information, including:

- **Newspapers.** Newspapers include stories about candidates for upcoming elections. Newspapers may support one candidate over another.
- **Candidate Materials.** The candidates' campaigns pay for written materials and advertisements on radio and television to encourage you to vote for their candidate. They may sponsor public meetings or other events for you to get to know the candidate. Candidates also typically have their own website.
- **Community and Civic Organizations.** Although these organizations are not allowed to support or oppose candidates for office, they can provide information about candidates' positions. Community and civic organizations often hold community meetings or candidates' forums to help inform voters about the candidates and the issues.
- **Issue Advocacy or Special Interest Groups.** In the United States, many different organizations promote a specific issue or cause, such as the well-being of children or the environment. These organizations often provide information about candidates' positions on an issue.
- **Internet.** Project Vote Smart has a website at <http://www.vote-smart.org/>. You can also reach Project Vote Smart by calling 1-888-868-3762. The website has a database of information about current elected officials, as well as candidates in upcoming elections. This information includes their education, work experience, and opinions on different issues.

### **A Helpful Source of Election-Related Information**

The League of Women Voters is a nonprofit organization that provides nonpartisan information about the election process in each state, including information about election dates, ID requirements, polling place locations, registration deadlines, and more. It also has a polling place locator that allows you to type in your address and find the poll location for your precinct. Its website is <http://www.VOTE411.org>.

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nonpartisan = Not affiliated with, supporting, or opposing a political party.

## SERVING ON A JURY

### What is Jury Duty?

A jury is a small group of citizens that are called by a court to hear statements made in a legal dispute and determine what they believe is the truth. Jurors make decisions, also called verdicts, based on the evidence that is presented by lawyers on both sides of the dispute, or *case*, and the law as instructed by the judge.

As a United States citizen you may be called to serve as a *juror*, or a member of the jury. Jury service is an important responsibility of citizenship.

**A Criminal Case:** Joe is charged by the state with murder. Joe is the defendant. The state is the plaintiff. The state is represented by a lawyer called the prosecutor. The jury decides if the person charged by the state with a crime is “guilty” or “not guilty.”

**A Civil Case:** Joe breaks Tony’s window. Joe refuses to pay Tony so that he can replace the window. Tony files a lawsuit against Joe, asking the court to force Joe to pay the cost of the window. Tony is the plaintiff. Joe is the defendant. The jury will decide if Joe was responsible for breaking Tony’s window and how much Joe should pay Tony.

### How Jurors Are Selected

You will get an official letter, also called a *summons*, in the mail telling you when and where to report for jury duty. You have to arrive at the courthouse on time to check in. Later, you may be shown a videotape on how the court works and the duties of a juror. During the day, you may be called to a courtroom where lawyers pick a jury for a particular case. You might not be called at all. If you are not called to a courtroom by the end of the day, you might be dismissed.

If you are called to a courtroom, you will be asked a series of questions by the lawyers. The lawyers interview people until they find enough jurors who they think are both qualified and able to serve.



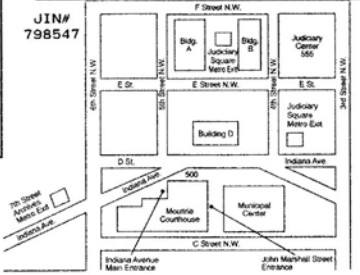

verdict = A formal finding of fact made by a jury on matters or questions submitted to the jury by a judge.

## What Happens When You Are Called to Serve on a Jury?

If you are picked to serve on the jury, you will learn much about how our justice system works. You may be picked to serve as a juror for a criminal case or for a civil case. Once the trial begins, your responsibility will be to listen carefully to both sides, as presented by the lawyers, and then to come to an agreement with your fellow jurors on the verdict.

## How Long is Jury Duty?

A person who is picked to serve on a jury for a case is expected to serve until the case is completed. It may take a few days, a week, or longer. In some states, you serve for one day or one complete trial. If you are not picked as a juror, you may go home and your jury duty is over. In others, you may need to report to jury duty for a certain number of days, even if you are not picked to serve as a juror.

 <b>Jury Summons</b> PLEASE BRING THIS UPPER SECTION WITH YOU WHEN YOU REPORT FOR JURY DUTY. DO NOT MAIL THIS FORM BACK.		<b>PETIT JUROR</b>
BY ORDER OF THE CHIEF JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, YOU ARE HEREBY SUMMONED TO SERVE AS A JUROR AS INDICATED BELOW. PLEASE COMPLETE THE ENCLOSED JUROR QUALIFICATION FORM AND RETURN IT WITHIN FIVE (5) DAYS. FAILURE TO APPEAR AS DIRECTED BY THIS SUMMONS MAY RESULT IN A FINE OF NOT MORE THAN THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS (\$300) OR IMPRISONMENT FOR NOT MORE THAN SEVEN (7) DAYS OR BOTH, D.C. CODE 11-1906.		
DATE AND TIME TO REPORT JULY 21, 2008 800 A.M.	TYPE OF JUROR PETIT JURY	<h1>JUROR</h1> <p>▲ DETACH HERE FOR JUROR BADGE ▲</p> 
WHERE TO REPORT MOULTRIE COURTHOUSE 500 INDIANA AVE., N.W. 3RD FLOOR ROOM 3130	LENGTH OF SERVICE ONE TRIAL OR ONE DAY	
JIN# RUFUS G. KING III DUANE B. DELANEY	CHIEF JUDGE CLERK OF THE COURT	
		
PLEASE READ IMPORTANT INFORMATION ON THE BACK OF THIS FORM		792 Parking is not provided. Public transportation is suggested.

*Jury Summons*

## Getting Excused From Jury Duty

You can be excused from jury duty for a variety of reasons, including:

- you cannot speak or understand English;
- you cannot serve because of a physical or medical disability (you must provide a letter from your doctor); or
- you are age 70 or older and do not want to serve.

You can also request to postpone or reschedule your jury service for personal or professional reasons, for example if you will be traveling on the date you are asked to serve or if your children are sick and you must stay home.

You should also be sure to check with your employer regarding their policy on jury duty. Employers can get fined if they fire someone for taking time off for jury duty, but they are not required to pay wages while an employee is on jury duty.

## Payment for Jurors

You will be paid a small amount for your time and transportation. However, you must pay for your own lunch.

### *Important Terms to Understand for Jury Duty*

- **Plaintiff** – The person bringing the case against another person, who is called the defendant. In a criminal case, the state or government is always the plaintiff. In a civil case, one person or group charges another.
- **Defendant** – The person who has been accused of committing a crime or civil offense.
- **Punishment** – The punishment for a defendant found guilty in a criminal case may be loss of freedom by serving jail time. The punishment in a civil case is typically a monetary fine. A defendant who is found guilty in a civil case never serves jail time.

## SERVING ON GOVERNMENT BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

### Role of Boards and Commissions

In the United States, federal, state, and local government agencies use a variety of boards and commissions made up of community residents to advise the government in making decisions and setting priorities. Boards and commissions provide an important opportunity for participation in democracy. Some examples of local boards and commissions are:

- **The Hennepin County Mental Health Advisory Council** in Minnesota advises the local government on children's and adult mental health issues within the city.
- **The Arlington Commission on Aging** in Virginia advises the county government on issues related to older persons residing in the county to assist in planning aging services.
- **The Fresno Multicultural Advisory Board** in California advises other boards, committees, and county agencies on the concerns and needs of the diverse cultural communities in the city.
- **The Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Commission** in Arizona advises the county government about community concerns and needs related to public parks and recreation facilities in the county.

Boards and commissions influence decisions that affect many different aspects of individual and community life, from services for seniors to public libraries and how public land will be used. It is important that they represent different segments of the community. For example, boards and commissions that advise the government on human services often require that some members represent people who receive services. By serving on a board or commission, you can ensure that the needs and concerns of your community are considered when decisions are made.

Typically, a mayor, city council, or county board selects community members to serve on boards and commissions. However, in most places you can submit an application and nominate yourself. Many boards and commissions are open to non-citizens, but some may be only open to citizens. State and local governments can decide which will be open to non-citizens and which will not.

## **Immigrants Who Served on Boards and Commissions**

Across the United States, many immigrants who now hold elected office at local, state, and national levels began their careers by serving on boards or commissions. Examples include:

- **San Jose City Councilmember Kansen Chu**, an immigrant from Taiwan, served on the Santa Clara County Mental Health Board, the Private Industry Council, and later a local school board in California.
- **Walter Tejada, Chair of the Arlington County Council in Virginia**, is an immigrant from El Salvador who began as a resident and community leader, serving on a number of citizen advisory groups including the Fiscal Affairs Advisory Commission, Affordable Housing Task Force, Sports Commission, Neighborhood Day Organizing Committee and the Bicentennial Celebration Task Force.
- **Florida Senator Melquíades Rafael “Mel” Martínez**, a Cuban immigrant, started his political career serving the boards of the Orlando Utilities Commission and the Orlando Housing Authority before being elected to the United States Senate.



Senator Mel Martínez (R-FL)

## RUNNING FOR OFFICE

While everyone can make their voice heard by elected officials and other decision-makers, as a citizen, you have the added privilege of being able to become a decision-maker yourself! By running for office and becoming an elected official, you can help make decisions, policies, and laws that affect your own ethnic community and the entire community in which you live.

As a naturalized citizen, you have the right and opportunity to run for every political office except for the President of the United States. Across the country hundreds of naturalized immigrants hold elected office, including mayors, city councilmembers, state legislators, governors, and current members of Congress. Here are just a few examples:

- **Congressman David Wu**, a Taiwanese American born in China, represents Oregon's First Congressional District.
- **Congresswoman Mazie K. Hirono**, born in Japan, represents Hawaii's Second Congressional District.
- **State Representative Cy Thao**, born in Laos, represents District 65A in Minnesota's House of Representatives.
- **State Delegate Ana Sol Gutierrez**, born in El Salvador, represents Maryland's District 18 in Montgomery County.
- **Assemblyman Alec Brook-Krasny**, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union, became the first Russian-speaking American to run for political office and now represents New York's 46th Assembly District.
- **City Councilmember Mathieu Eugene**, a Haitian immigrant, represents District 40 in Brooklyn on New York City's City Council.
- **Mayor Mohamed Khairullah**, a Syrian-born immigrant, is Mayor of Prospect Park, New Jersey.

### Ready to Practice Citizenship?

All of us, regardless of where we were born, what year we came to the United States, what we earn, or how many years we attended school, have the right and responsibility to contribute our time and talents to shaping our collective future and the future of our communities. Yes, making your voice heard can be a little intimidating at first. But once you get started, you'll find that it's fun and you'll want to do even more.

As one of the Ethiopian taxi drivers in Washington D.C., commented after the first time he participated in a rally at City Hall, *"I learned that in the United States, the government works for us, the people. When we spoke out, they really listened. Now, we are ready to join together and do more to solve the problems facing our community."*

## LEARNING ACTIVITY:

### Mapping Civic Participation in Your Community

**Purposes of the Activity:** 1) To help learners become familiar with civic participation activities and organizations in their own community; 2) To introduce learners to civic participation vocabulary; and 3) To provide an opportunity for learners to practice this vocabulary through conversations with their neighbors and co-workers.

**Time Required:** Two one-hour class discussions

**Materials Needed:** Vocabulary List, Take-Home Assignment, Newsprint

#### Part I: Preparing for Take-Home Assignment

To prepare the learners to complete their take-home assignment, first generate a classroom discussion to familiarize learners with civic participation concepts and vocabulary.

1. Ask learners to pair up and discuss the following: What does civic participation mean to them? Share 1-2 experiences they had in their home country with civic participation.
2. Then, as a full class, come up with a definition of civic participation and share examples.
3. Next, review the take-home assignment and the vocabulary list to make sure students are clear on the assignment.

#### ***Important Civic Participation Terms***

- **Advocacy** – Speaking up for people and the issues that affect them by supporting or opposing a cause, idea, action, or policy.
- **Civic participation or engagement** – Joining with others to carry out activities that solve problems and benefit everyone in a local community or a nation.
- **Community organizing** – Bringing together the people affected by an issue or problem to identify a solution, develop an action plan, and then work toward that common goal.
- **Public hearings** – A meeting held by a government board, commission, or city council that is open to the public. Community members can offer their input on an issue by giving testimony at a hearing.
- **Rallies, marches, protests, vigils** – These are all activities where community members gather together in a public space to express their support or opposition to an issue or government action.
- **Volunteering** – Offering your time and talents, without pay, to help your neighbor or to help a particular group or organization that serves the community.

**Part II: Take-Home Assignment**

Explain to the learners that this assignment will require them to have conversations in English with several people they know. Instruct them to:

1. Choose 2-3 people you know who you think will be comfortable answering questions. You could pick a neighbor, someone you work with, or someone from your place of worship. Try to find someone who is not a member of your ethnic community.
2. Ask each one of these people if you could speak with them for about 15 minutes to ask some questions about *civic participation*.
3. Conduct a short interview with each person. Start the interview by stating, "I am doing a homework assignment for my class. We are learning about civic participation and I'd like to ask you some questions about your experience with *civic participation*."

You can also work with the learners to create their own questions. Possible questions might include:

- What does civic participation mean to you?
- Have you ever been involved in any organizations or activities to help the community and solve community problems?
- If you have, can you tell me about the organization and activity and how you were involved?

**Part III: Creating a Civic Participation Map**

Once the learners have completed their assignment, have them share and discuss what they found by creating a civic participation map. Put several sheets of newsprint on the wall. Draw a rough map of your community. Ask the learners to come up to the map and list all of the different types of organizations and activities that they heard about. If the organization or activity takes place in a particular neighborhood, they can place it in that neighborhood on the map.

Once all the learners have shared their lists, have a discussion about what they found. Possible questions you could ask include:

- Are people in your community involved in civic participation?
- Which civic participation activities and organizations would you like to get involved with?
- How are the civic participation activities you heard about similar to or different from ones from your home country?

Keep your "map" on the wall and learners can add to it throughout the year as they discover new civic participation opportunities in the community!

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## ***How Can Community Organizations Promote Immigrant Civic Participation?***

Organizations that provide services to or advocate for immigrant communities can promote and support immigrant civic participation in many ways. For example, your organization could:

- ✓ **Teach people about their rights** by conducting “Know Your Rights” educational campaigns that use community meetings, workshops, and flyers to provide information about civil rights.
- ✓ **Teach people about “how the system works”** by sponsoring a series of workshops that focus on how different systems, such as the school or health care system, work, how to access those systems, and what the rights and responsibilities of individuals are within each system.
- ✓ **Involve immigrants in advocacy** by providing leadership development and advocacy skills training, and by including immigrants in decisions about how to prioritize their concerns. Leadership programs often involve training workshops around specific issues and skills such as running meetings and public speaking, then having participants undertake a community project together, such as an advocacy campaign or organizing a festival or community clean-up.
- ✓ **Organize the community** by bringing people together around a specific common concern or issue, working with them to identify potential solutions and develop an action plan, then mobilizing other affected members of the community to get involved.
- ✓ **Get involved in voter registration and education.** If the immigrant community has been in the United States long enough to achieve citizenship, then registering people to vote and educating them about the importance of voting is a logical place to start.

Some community members may feel more comfortable starting with activities such as volunteering or helping with neighborhood clean-up campaigns, then over time, become ready to speak out on policy issues. By providing opportunities for immigrants to build their skills and confidence, your organization can play an important role in facilitating immigrant civic participation.

***Sample Advocacy Letter***

May 20, 2008

Congresswoman \_\_\_\_\_  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I live in your district at \_\_\_\_\_. In 2004, I became a U.S. citizen and voted for the first time. I believe that all immigrants to this country who are eligible for citizenship should have the opportunity to become a citizen. However, we need more programs that can help guide people through the process. If it weren't for Catholic Charities, I would have been too overwhelmed to go through the process by myself and would never have become a citizen.

I am writing to urge you to support legislation that would fund a National Citizenship Program. We need a program that makes sure that the services that helped me become a citizen – English and citizenship classes, help filling out the forms, and help preparing for the interview – are available to all immigrants who are eligible to become citizens.

Thank you for your past support of programs and services for immigrants, and I hope that you will support a National Citizenship Program.

Sincerely,

(signature)  
(phone number)  
(e-mail address)