

# Rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizens

By U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services on 06.01.17

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Image 1. Members of the armed services recite the pledge of allegiance during a naturalization ceremony at the USS Midway Museum, in May 2009 in San Diego, California. Photo: Legalman 1st Class Jennifer L. Bailey/U.S. Navy

People in the United States have the basic freedoms and protections outlined in our founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. For more than 200 years, we have been bound by the ideals expressed in these documents. Because of these ideals, our society has prospered. The U.S. government, as established in the Constitution, protects the rights of each individual, without regard to background, culture, or religion. To keep our system of representative democracy and individual freedom, you should strive to become an active participant in American civic life.

Upon taking the Oath of Allegiance, you promise your loyalty and allegiance to the United States of America. U.S. citizens have important rights and responsibilities. These include the right to vote in federal elections and the ability to serve on a jury. Citizenship is a privilege that offers the extraordinary opportunity to be a part of the governing process. Former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once said, "The only title in our democracy superior to that of President [is] the title of citizen." In the United States, the power of government comes directly from the people.

## Rights Of A Citizen

**Freedom to express yourself.** "Freedom of expression" includes several individual rights. It includes freedom of speech, freedom to peaceably assemble, and the freedom to petition the government for a redress of grievances. In a representative democracy, individual beliefs and opinions are important to our national dialogue and necessary to maintain a responsible citizenry. Americans can speak and act as they wish as long as it does not endanger others or obstruct another's freedom of expression in the process.

**Freedom to worship as you wish.** In the United States, the freedom to hold any religious belief, or none at all, is considered a basic, or unalienable right. The government cannot violate this right. Religious intolerance is unacceptable in a society where everyone has individual freedom. In cases where religious practices hurt the common good or endanger the health of others, the Supreme Court has imposed minor limitations of the way some religious practices are performed.

**Right to a prompt, fair trial by jury.** People accused of a crime have the right to a speedy and fair trial by a jury of peers. In a free society, those accused of a crime are assumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. The American system of justice treats all people fairly, ensuring the rights of the individual are maintained.

**Right to keep and bear arms.** The Constitution protects the rights of individuals to have firearms for personal defense. This privilege is subject to reasonable restrictions designed to prevent unfit persons, or those with the intent to criminally misuse guns or other firearms, from obtaining such items.

**Right to vote in elections for public officials.** By voting in federal, state, and local elections, citizens choose their government leaders. The right to vote is one of the most important liberties granted to American citizens. It is the foundation of a free society.

**Right to apply for federal employment.** Public service is a worthy endeavor and can lead to an extremely rewarding career working for the American people. Many federal government jobs require applicants to have U.S. citizenship. U.S. citizens can apply for federal employment within a government agency or department.

**Right to run for elected office.** U.S. citizenship is required for many elected offices in this country. Naturalized U.S. citizens can run for any elected office they choose with the exception of President and Vice President of the United States, which require candidates to be native-born citizens.

**Freedom to pursue "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."** As a society based on individual freedom, it is the inherent right of all Americans to pursue "life, liberty and the pursuit



of happiness." The United States is a land of opportunity. People are able to choose their own path in life based on personal goals and objectives. Americans can make their own decisions and pursue their own interests as long as it does not interfere with the rights of others.

## **Responsibilities Of A Citizen**

**Support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.** The Constitution establishes the U.S. system of representative democracy and outlines the inherent principles of freedom, liberty and opportunity to which all citizens are entitled. The continuity of this Nation's unique freedoms depends on the support of its citizens. When the Constitution and its ideals are challenged, citizens must defend these principles against all adversaries.

**Stay informed on the issues affecting your community.** U.S. citizens should learn about the issues and candidates running for office before casting a vote in an election. Staying informed allows citizens the opportunity to keep the candidates and laws responsive to the needs of the local community.

**Participate in the democratic process.** Voting in the federal, state and local elections is the most important responsibility of any citizen. Voting ensures that our system of government is maintained and individual voices are clearly heard by officials.

### **Respect and obey federal, state and local laws.**

Laws are rules of conduct that are established by an authority and followed by the community to maintain order in a free society. Every person living in the United States must follow laws established through federal, state and local authorities.

**Respect the rights, beliefs and opinions of others.** Though the United States is a nation of diverse backgrounds and cultures, our common civic values united us as one nation. Tolerance, through courtesy and respect for the beliefs and opinions of others, is the hallmark of a civilized society and ensures the continuity of liberty and freedom for future generations.



**Participate in your local community.** Being a responsible member of one's local community is important to the success of representative democracy. Community engagement through volunteerism, participation in town hall meetings and public hearings, joining a local parent-teacher association, and running for public office are ways individuals can actively contribute to the well-being of the community.

**Pay income and other taxes honestly, and on time, to federal, state, and local authorities.** Taxes pay for government services for the people of the United States. Some of these services include: educating children and adults, keeping our country safe and secure, and providing medical services to the elderly and less fortunate. Paying taxes on time and in full ensures that these services continue for all Americans.

**Serve on a jury when called upon.** For U.S. citizens, serving on a jury is a very important service to the community. The Constitution guarantees that all persons accused of a crime have the right to a "speedy and public trial by an impartial jury." Jury service gives U.S. citizens the

opportunity to participate in the vital task of achieving just, fair results in matters that come before the court.

**Defend the country if the need should arise.**

The Armed Forces of the United States, the military, is currently an all-volunteer force. However, should the need arise in time of war, it is important that all citizens join together and assist the Nation where they are able. This support could include defending the Nation through the military, noncombatant or civilian service.

