

Americans' rights and responsibilities

By U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, adapted by Newsela staff 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

For over 200 years, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution have protected the rights and freedom of Americans. Before the declaration was written, America was controlled by the British. A group of early leaders, the Founding Fathers, wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776. In this text, they stated that they would no longer serve the British.

After the declaration, the American states fought off the British and became the United States of America. The Founding Fathers wrote the Constitution to describe how the new free government would be run. They also included the rights that American citizens should have.

Today, people can have different backgrounds, cultures or religions. No matter what, every U.S. citizen has the rights listed in the Constitution. The same goes for new citizens. When someone becomes a U.S. citizen, they take an Oath of Allegiance. This oath is a promise to be loyal and support the country.

Louis Brandeis used to be a member of the Supreme Court, the highest court in America. This court can have the final word on any legal case. Brandeis once said, "The only title in our

democracy superior to that of President [is] the title of citizen." The government only has power because of the American people.

Rights Of A Citizen

Freedom to express yourself. This includes freedom of speech and the freedom to meet in a group peacefully. It also includes the freedom to protest if you think the government has done something wrong. Americans can speak and act as they wish as long as they do not hurt others or stop others from speaking freely.

Freedom to worship as you wish. You have the freedom to follow any religion or no religion at all. However, some religious acts can be hurtful and unhealthy for others. The Supreme Court has put some limits on these kind of actions.

Right to a prompt, fair trial. People accused of a crime have the right to a fast and fair trial by a jury. This jury is made of citizens, who should not be prejudiced. Someone accused of a crime is innocent until they are proven guilty.

Right to keep and bear arms. The Constitution protects your right to have firearms. Citizens have the right to protect themselves, but they can lose this right if they are a danger to others. Criminals do not have this right.

Right to vote in elections. You can vote in federal, state, and city elections to choose your leaders. The right to vote stops politicians from having too much power. Instead, it keeps power in the hands of citizens.

Right to apply for employment in the government. U.S. citizens can apply for a job working for the government, which can be a rewarding career in the service of the American people.

Right to run for elected office. You must become a U.S. citizen if you want to run for office. If you want to run for President or Vice President, you also have to be born in the U.S.

Freedom to pursue "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." These words come from the Declaration of Independence. You have the right to choose your own path in life and to set your own goals. Americans can make their own decisions as long as they do not take rights away from others.

Responsibilities Of A Citizen

Every citizen has rights, but they have responsibilities, too.



Support and defend the Constitution against all enemies. The Constitution gives all citizens freedom, liberty and opportunity. However, the Constitution can only exist if citizens support it. If it gets questioned by people from other countries, citizens should defend it.

Stay informed. U.S. citizens should learn about the candidates running for office and know about problems in their city, state and country. Be informed before you vote.

Participate in the democratic process. Vote in city, state and federal elections, because it is the most important responsibility of any citizen. Voting is our voice that tells our leaders what needs to be done.

Respect and obey federal, state and local laws. Every person living in the United States must follow federal, state and city laws. These rules help keep society in order, so that we can have our rights respected.

Respect the rights, beliefs and opinions of others. The United States is a nation of different kinds of people, but we are united into one nation. We must respect the beliefs and opinions of others, so that future generations can have the same rights.

Participate in your town or city. Be a part of your community and help in any way you can. Go to town hall meetings, volunteer to help others, join a local parent-teacher group, or run for public office.

Pay your taxes. Taxes pay for the government, so it can help educate children and adults, keep our country safe, and our people healthy. Paying taxes on time helps all Americans get these important services.

Serve on a jury when called upon. U.S. citizens can serve on a jury to decide fairly if a person is innocent or guilty.

Defend the country. You can volunteer to be a part of the Armed Forces of the United States. Today, all our soldiers and sailors are volunteers, but there are also ways to defend our country without fighting. You can volunteer to help with the environment, education or health care.

