

What It Takes to Be a Citizen in a Community

By John McKnight

The center of community is civic life – our relationships and activities in civil society. Civil society is not the world of government or business. It is the other space where people connect around their own purposes and goals and money is not the driving force. It is the space occupied by family, friends, neighbors, clubs, organizations and associations – often called the voluntary sector.

When we talk about the value of being included in community life, it means participating in civil society that we are talking about. Civil society is not only the center of community life, it is also the location of our freedom in a democracy. We know this because in past dictatorships like Nazi Germany or the communist Soviet Union, the dictator's first target to attack was civil society. They eliminated all forms of free associations, and the only groups allowed to function were those controlled by the dictator. And most importantly, no one was free to speak.

Our nation's founders clearly understood that at its core, our democracy depended on citizens being able to associate and speak freely in their communities. This is the reason why the first article in the US

Constitution is our Bill of Rights, which guarantees freedom of association and freedom of speech. Both of these rights are the vital center of our democracy and our communities.

Moreover, the founders were primarily concerned with protecting the power of citizens to engage in political speech and political associations in their local community because they believed local people holding power was the foundation of democracy.

This leads us to the electoral process and voting. The political purpose of free association and free speech is to provide citizens the opportunity to advocate, debate and discuss issues of personal and common concern. And from this debate, we trust that an informed electorate emerges and expresses their decisions by voting.

In a democracy, the community is the center of civic life. This "life" depends on using our right to free association and speech. These rights give us the power to act as citizens to influence, debate and perfect our community. And from this power, grows connection, communication, deliberation and decision-making, which comes in many forms including voting.

So what does it take to be a citizen in a community?

First, a person needs to be involved in local associations, and even be at the forefront of forming new ones.

Second, a person needs to have opportunities and platforms that ensure their voices are freely expressed and heard.

Third, a person needs to be part of the forums, where issues of both self-interest and common concern are discussed and debated.

Fourth, a person needs the opportunity to participate in the electoral process and of course, to vote. However, it is important to understand that in an effective democracy, voting is the end of a process preceded by participation in an associational activity, which allows us as citizens to contribute our voice, join forums and energize the civic engagement process.

When you take advantage of and engage in these four practices, that is what citizenship means.

John McKnight Bio:

John McKnight is co-founder of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University and has worked on research on community organizations and neighborhood policy for nearly

three decades. Additionally, McKnight has conducted his own research on social service delivery systems, health policy, the inclusion of marginalized people and institutional racism.