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Citizenship and Politics **Guideline #3 for Government and Citizenship**

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The third of the Center's *Guidelines for Government and Citizenship* (<http://www.cpjustice.org/guidelines>) deals with the responsibility of citizens. The six brief paragraphs of this *Guideline* say that citizenship amounts to more than merely abiding by the law and also more than merely lobbying for one or two important causes that citizens may hold dear. Citizenship is about exercising a life-long responsibility that requires the ability to make sound judgments about the well-being of one's political community and the world. And since individuals, each on their own, cannot possibly take on all that is involved in such a responsibility, citizenship requires communal, organized efforts of research, education, argument, and action.

1. The *Guideline* on "Citizenship" begins with this statement: "Citizens share with governments the responsibility to uphold a just political community." Sharing this responsibility is of two kinds. Government and citizens are both obligated to uphold the law. Governments make, enforce, and adjudicate the law, but without citizen support and compliance, government cannot succeed in its job. The second kind of sharing, at least in our representative form of government, is the participation of citizens in making, enforcing, and adjudicating the law through elections to public office, communicating with public officials, and using the courts. We must be active as well as compliant citizens.

2. Sharing in both kinds of responsibility is stated more fully in the second paragraph: "Responsible citizenship includes not only abiding by the law, paying taxes, and enjoying the benefits of law-abiding behavior, but also helping to shape the political community to conform to the demands of justice."

The first two paragraphs of this *Guideline* take us back to the context established by the first two *Guidelines* about political community and the task of government.

Citizenship is the role played by all who belong to the political community of a nation under its government(s). Thus the aim and purpose of citizenship is the same as that of government, namely, to establish and maintain a community of justice for all. If American citizens are merely passive in keeping the law (most of the time) and give no thought to whether the political community of the republic is just, then government will exercise more and more responsibility without being held accountable for its acts of injustice. If, on the other hand, citizens are always agitating for political change and failing to uphold the law, the political community will be undermined by anarchy.

The question then is how to establish and maintain a political community in which citizenship is encouraged and nurtured as an important and vigorous responsibility while at the same time citizens and government work together to make the political community more and more just as a whole. For this to be possible, a firmly established means of electoral representation must exist along with the means of appealing to the courts when injustice occurs. Yet in order for elections and judicial processes to function well, citizenship itself must be recognized and protected as a freely initiated responsibility in an open society.

3. The *Guideline's* third paragraph articulates many of the essentials of a free and open society in which citizenship can flourish. It calls for a free press and other independent organizations such as think tanks and advocacy groups. The Center for Public Justice is an expression of such freedom—working “to educate citizens, develop leaders, and shape policy proposals as a means of advancing the vision of politics and government articulated in its *Guidelines* for Government and Citizenship.” What the Center recognizes and promotes is the organized cooperation of citizens so they can be more effective and persevering in working for the common public good over an extended period of time. Not every citizen needs to be a full-time political activist, but some citizens need to work full time in order to develop public policy proposals, to study and assess our political system, and to help educate and inspire other citizens to fulfill their civic responsibilities.

The growing challenge in the United States today with regard to the exercise of civic initiative is that very few citizens are organized for the purpose of promoting the common good of a just political community. Most citizens either channel their political passions into one or two issues, such as abortion or the environment, or hold back from any participation at all because they see the political “game” as meaningless, irrelevant, or a waste of time. Only about half of eligible voters vote in elections. Only a very small percentage of citizens are active in the political parties. On the other hand, many interest groups such as the rifle association, AARP for retired persons, pro-life groups, industries that produce military equipment, and lobby organizations for teachers, lawyers, doctors, and insurance companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year pressuring government to do what is in their interest. The common good of all—public justice—is not something that motivates much political activism.

4. The fourth paragraph points to the importance of authentic representation of citizens in government, something that goes beyond the indirect influence of citizens

through interest groups or the media: “For citizens to exercise effective influence on government, they must have adequate representation in government through elections to legislative assemblies and executive offices.” And the electoral system needs to be organized in such a way that those who run for office owe more to the people who elect them than to the lobby groups who currently raise most of the money for candidates and supply most of the pressure on candidates. This is what the next paragraph of the *Guideline* articulates, implying the need for a new kind of electoral system in the United States:

5. “The aim of periodic elections should be to place representatives of the people in government offices. Elections to legislative bodies are not acts of governing, but acts of gaining representation in government. A healthy electoral system is one in which those elected are put forward and held accountable by the people they represent. Elected officials should not be beholden to powerful interest groups or the wealthy, ahead of the body of citizens they represent.”

Despite countless efforts to reform campaign finance schemes and to increase voter turnout, the American electoral system discourages voters from voting, puts more power in the hands of interest groups and the wealthy than in the hands of voters, and leaves most citizens ignorant of what really goes on in Congress. This is why the Center argues in the sixth and final paragraph of its *Guideline* on Citizenship that:

6. “It is essential to the civic health of the American republic that ongoing electoral reform take place, making more adequate representation possible for all citizens.” [For a critical evaluation of our current system and a proposal for significant electoral reform see Chapter 8 of my book *In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).]