



Citizenship


Guidelines
for Government and Citizenship

a publication of
The Center for Public Justice

- 1 Citizens share with governments the responsibility to uphold a just political community.
- 2 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.
- 3 Citizens should thus be able to exercise their influence by means of the media and other independent organizations, such as think tanks, lobbying organizations, and advocacy groups. Freedoms of speech and association are necessary civil rights since they are two of the means by which citizens exercise individual and organized influence in society. The Center for Public Justice is one expression of the free exercise of responsibility in the United States. It exists 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.
- 4 For citizens to exercise effective influence on government, they must have adequate representation in government through elections to legislative assemblies and executive offices.
- 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.
- 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.

Implications

1. Electoral reform needs to go deeper than campaign finance reform or making it easier for citizens to register and vote, important as these are. Reform must get to the root of the sense of powerlessness or meaninglessness that many citizens feel about elections and politics in general. The United States today has a weakened, declining system of citizen participation. Only about half of eligible voters choose to vote in elections; national political parties do very little to train, discipline, or hold accountable the candidates of their parties; and interest groups exercise more influence over individual representatives than do the people those elected officials represent.

2. Citizens should not mistake the right to express political opinions through interest groups and the media for the right to exercise influence in and through elected representatives. Real political influence requires a voice in government through those whom voters truly want as their representatives. Only an electoral system that allows for adequate representation of all organized voices can do justice to citizens in a democracy.

3. The Center for Public Justice advocates a type of electoral reform for the House of Representatives called Proportional Representation (PR). Each state would structure congressional elections so that the number of seats it has in the House of Representatives would be filled by a statewide PR election. This would help create national political parties; give both minority and majority voices representation in Congress, in proportion to the number of votes they receive; make members of Congress more accountable to those who elect them; and substantially increase citizen participation and voter turnout, thus increasing citizen confidence in government.

For Further Reading

Amy, Douglas J. *Real Choices/New Voices: The Case for Proportional Representation Elections in the United States*. Columbia University Press, 1993.

Sherratt, Timothy R. and Ronald P. Mahurin. *Saints as Citizens: A Guide to Public Responsibilities for Christians*. Baker Books, 1995.

Skillen, James W. *In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations*. Chapter 8. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.

For more information, search on this topic at www.cpjustice.org.

Published by the Center for Public Justice, the Guidelines for Government and Citizenship are papers that:

- Address the nature of political community, the task of government, and the responsibility of citizens.
- Illustrate how the Center's philosophy expresses itself when applied to a number of key policy areas.
