

# WHO OR WHAT IS A GOOD CITIZEN?

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## 1<sup>st</sup> Year Student Writing Competition – 1<sup>st</sup> place

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The concept of citizenship traditionally has two meanings: it both implies a legal relationship between a person and a country, being synonymous to nationality, and defines a normative ideal of the association with a political community. While analyzing the attributes of ‘a good citizen’, we mostly deal with the latter. Though it is democracy that enables us to fully exploit the capacities of our citizenship by giving us civil, political and social rights, it itself requires responsible citizens for the proper functioning of its institutions. However, more and more people these days prefer to abstain from public life and to pursue private interests, and with the growth of passive citizenship, it is worth asking: what constitutes a good citizen? I believe that a good citizen is a person who never makes a choice between private interests and public activities, but the one whose life is balanced between those two; the one who needs to step outside their close circle to fulfill their life-mission and realize their potential.

In the first place, citizenship is defined by a particular attitude towards the political process. Since ancient times, it was generally accepted that political involvement was an essential part of one’s life. In 335 BC, for example, Aristotle wrote that, “man by nature is a political animal”. Being able to actively engage in policy-making is what put humans above other species, and someone who avoids it is naturally of a lesser value as a person. Adrian Oldfields holds a similar opinion by saying: “...political participation is the highest form of human living-together”.

What are the implications of this? Personally, I think that being a good citizen starts with knowledge of the laws, the assent and the complete submission to them. One should not enjoy the benefits flowing from a country if they do not accept and respect certain rules. Secondly, one should be loyal to the country and agree with its foreign policy. At the same time, it is not hard to recognize the fact that for a country’s laws and actions to be accepted, a certain condition is to be met: they must fit the democratic benchmark. The question is, what should a citizen do if he feels that this condition is not satisfied? It is appropriate to mention here the so-called Socratic citizenship. The life of the giant of ancient philosophy, Socrates (470-399 BC), gives us an example of a citizen who put his moral code above the custom and authority of Athens. Likewise, any citizen should first run a lacmus test

to check whether laws and policies benefit the country and do no harm to the rest of the world.

Another way to look at it differs from Socrates' position: the philosopher, in principle, abstained from public life; he said that he would not "dirty himself with politics". On the contrary, I would argue that a good citizen should express his opinion by means of public discourse. He should be willing to make his case during political debate with public interests in view and to communicate his reasons to others. This is a way to affect the legislative and executive processes by accessible means.

Equally important, a good citizen is to be characterized by a certain economic behavior. Firstly, he follows the principle of self-reliance: a physically and mentally healthy citizen should not be a burden for his state. In contrast, he contributes to a country's economy and forms his demand according to his means. Secondly, he is cautious of goods consumption of which might affect others. In other words, he avoids creating externalities - as a case in point, smoking. By the same token, entrepreneurs, in deciding what and how to produce, should choose to be socially and environmentally responsible. Thirdly, a good citizen is not extreme in his demands and he knows the value of economic resources; to illustrate, he feels satisfaction in recycling or using economical electric appliances. In addition, he is a regular taxpayer, ready to contribute his share to the production of public goods.

Furthermore, a good citizen's identity is shaped by his socio-cultural outlook and actions. Most importantly, he is tolerant towards people of different races, nationalities and gender. He tries to improve the quality of life on various levels of society, beginning with his own family, educating his children, setting high moral standards and taking care of the elderly. The improvement can also be made on the level of communities through local charities, social projects to raise awareness of existing problems and propose methods to solve them. Interestingly, one can attempt to change the current state of affairs without any involvement in politics. An article in *The Guardian* from February 6, 2013 tells the story of Sarah Kavanagh, a 16-year-old high school student from Mississippi, whose campaign against PepsiCo led to the company's decision to make one of their drinks free from a component usually used as a flame retardant. This is one of millions of examples how people make efforts to improve the lives of others.

Last but not least, one should be interested in history, thus incorporating the experience of past generations into his decision-making. E. M. White (1875) wrote about a good citizen:

*He must attain the balance between appreciation of past achievements and aspiration after future ideals, the link between which forms the actions of the present. On the one hand, he subordinates himself, but in no servile sense, to the customs and laws of his city and country...he acknowledges himself as a part of a great whole. But the complete citizen...is zealous for reform, and wishes to see each generation, including his own, reaching a higher stage.*

A citizen is not just a legal status defined by rights and responsibilities but a shared identity, the expression of one's membership to a community. A good citizen preserves his personal integrity and avoids the conflict of interest: he equally enjoys his private and public life without discontinuity in his character; he sees the latter neither as a burden, nor as a platform to pursue his personal projects. To be a good citizen is to believe that you can make a difference for the better.

April 2014

Project Organizer/Editor: Alex Bunten  
Judges: Alex Bunten, Helen Owen, Natalia Kolyadina

\*Project made possible through the generous assistance of the  
'ICEF Teaching and Learning Development Fund 2013-2014'