



The Peace Alliance

CITIZENSHIP PRIMER

"I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors."

~ Thomas Jefferson

As activists, our job is to facilitate social change to create a more peaceful culture. While not all progress can be achieved through political means, it is still crucial to understand how to best utilize the political system as a tool to create this change. For our purposes, it is essential to understand the basics of how U.S. law is passed and the role that the citizen plays in this process.

The Role of the Government

There are three equal branches of the U.S. Government: Legislative (the U.S. Congress), Executive (the President), and Judicial (the Supreme Court). Our Founders deliberately established the co-equality of all three branches as a system of checks and balances.

Congress consists of two branches, the Senate and the House of Representatives, and serves to create law. The President can veto a law if she or he has the Congressional support to do so. Otherwise, her or his job is to propose new laws and execute laws that are already established. The role of the Judiciary is to assure that all laws are both made and executed in accordance with the U.S. Constitution.

Every American living in one of the 50 states is represented by one House member and two Senators. The make-up of the House of Representatives is determined by population, while each state regardless of its size is represented by two Senators. There are 441 members (435 voting) of the U.S. House of Representatives and 100 members of the U.S. Senate.

In order for a bill to become law, it must ultimately be passed by both the House and the Senate and then signed into law by the President. Bills are initially introduced by a member of Congress from either the House or the Senate. If enough votes are present in both houses, the House and Senate versions of the bill are then put into Conference Committee. In committee, the two versions of the bill are revised and blended, then put before the entire Congress for a vote.

The Role of the People

Your Congressperson and Senators are well aware that they are elected by their constituents. If we don't express our opinions to them through citizen activism such as constituent meetings, phone calls, letters, and membership in citizen lobbying groups, then we can't complain when our opinions aren't reflected in Congressional policy making. Our role is to tell our Representatives how we think and what we feel. Our right to do so is the Constitutional guarantee that sets a democracy apart from every other form of government.

Yet our political freedom is like a muscle that must be exercised or else it atrophies. There are currently several paid corporate lobbyists for every Congressional Representative. If a corporate lobbyist is speaking to your representative practically every day, it is hardly enough for you to speak to them through the voting booth only every two or four years.

In the words of Congressman John Conyers (D-MI.), "Congress is a reactive body." The current crisis in our democracy may have less to do with Congressional failure to express the will of the people and more to do with the failure of the people to express their will in a meaningful way. In order to push for legislative action, we must present a compelling case both to our fellow citizens and our elected officials. A collective desire then becomes a political constituency with both the will and the power to affect the laws of the United States.

The Power of Citizenship

In the U.S. Constitution, our Founders established a profound yet delicate relationship not only among the branches of government, but also between the government and the people. Through our electoral system, we ourselves are the ultimate check and balance on unfettered government power. Yet as patriots from Benjamin Franklin to Abraham Lincoln have pointed out, citizens must be vigilant. Vital citizenship is a demanding and active role in which we are called to take individual responsibility for our function as ultimate keepers of the democratic flame. When Lincoln said that government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" would not perish from the earth, he was well aware that it is up to each of us to ensure that. No generation can guarantee freedom for generations to come.

Laws do not change overnight, nor should they. However, it is equally true, as written by Thomas Jefferson, that, "as (the human mind) becomes more developed (and)... enlightened, institutions must advance to keep pace with the times." Congressional Representatives have thousands of bills put before them for consideration during any Congressional session. It is to be expected that it takes considerable effort to get their serious attention, and perhaps even moreso to get their support for a particular bill. Yet surely the effort is worthwhile. For pro-peacebuilding legislation does reflect what Jefferson referred to as "progress of the human mind" by presenting a new model for the amelioration of violence and the waging of peace. As such, it represents both a philosophical as well as a political advance for U.S. society.

Citizen activism rarely reaps a quick fix. The U.S. anti-slavery society was established in 1833 and the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863. The women's suffrage movement officially began in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. Women were granted the right to vote through the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Every serious political advance in America has taken years to achieve, as may this one. However, this process may be expedited by the advances in technology and communication that today provide extraordinary opportunities for the organization of a grassroots movement. Today, it is time for our own generation to respond to a great historical challenge: to interrupt and transform the patterns of violence that threaten to destroy not only our own, but all of human civilization.

Many of the changes that we are passionate about are not new. Many have been proposed in various forms throughout history. Many are efforts with personal, political, spiritual, and social dimensions. When we advocate for legislation we address the political aspect of an issue. Affirming peacebuilding through politics helps influence the other dimensions as well.

As peace activists, it is our responsibility to bring our voices to the table of U.S. power. If we can make ourselves heard, our voices of peace can be our generation's gift, should we choose to give it, to our nation, to our children, and to the progress of humanity.