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What Does it Mean to Be a Good Citizen?

By Timothy Sexton, eHow Contributor

Being a good citizen can mean many different things to different people. One thing that is clear, however, is that being a good citizen means more than rote recitation of a pledge of allegiance and saluting the flag. To truly be a good citizen means more than mere symbolic patriotism and it must not be confused with being a follower of a certain political party or ideology.

Law Abidement

Following the laws of the country is the first step toward becoming a good citizen. It is important to obey the rules and regulations set forward by majority opinion as to what represents the most tangible balance between freedom and security. That balance is what is known as civilization, and if there are no laws, then anarchy reigns. In America, however, it is also the sign of a good citizen to violate laws that are considered unjust in the pursuit of changing misguided majority opinion.

Civil Disobedience

America was founded upon the concept of civil disobedience. The founding fathers of the United States engaged in what their enemies would have termed acts of terrorism to change what were seen as unjust laws, and throughout the history of America good citizenry has been predicated upon a willingness to violate certain laws considered unreasonable or unmerited. While in the past the drive to overturn unjust laws necessarily resulted in violence, in today's society the access to representation and especially the impact of media spotlight makes resorting to violence so unnecessary as to no longer even qualify as a last resort.

Political Awareness

One sign of a good citizen has historically been one who exercises his right to vote. Voting along not does qualify one as a good citizen, however. An uninformed vote is just as much as a waste as not voting. To truly be a good citizen, you should pay attention to both sides of any political argument. Critical thinking skills must be engaged to separate propaganda from factual evidence and spin from intellectual discourse. A genuinely good citizen bases his vote not upon the political party affiliation of a candidate but rather upon the issues and the candidate's grasp of understanding of the intricacies of the issue.

Dissent

There is perhaps no better sign of being a good citizen in America than the willingness to express dissent from the majority opinion. Freedom of speech was so important to the writers of the Constitution that they made it part of the First Amendment. Freedom to speak out against leaders and against the will of the majority is not just part of being a good citizen, it is essential for ensuring that democracy continues unabated.

Helping

Part of being a good citizen means taking up the slack where the government cannot help people and big business sees no profit in it. Examples of being a good citizen can range from donating clothes to church charities to using your vacation time to help strangers in a strange town recover from a natural disaster. At its most extreme, this type of good citizenry means joining the military and sacrificing your life so that others may continue to enjoy the privilege of choosing not to be a good citizen if they don't want to.