Having a driver’s license gives you certain rights. These include the right to drive on public roads and highways, and to park where the law allows. As a driver you also have duties. Your duties, which are required by law, include observing traffic signals and signs and obeying the speed limit. In addition to your duties, you have responsibilities. You are expected to drive in a way that will not endanger others and that will protect the safety of other drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. Holding the “office of citizen” is like being a licensed driver—in both situations, you have important rights, duties, and responsibilities.

Rights of Citizens

Listed below are some of the rights of American citizens.

- the right to vote and to hold elected office
- the right to say what you think in speech or in writing
- the right to practice your own religion
- the right to have a fair trial

These rights, and our other rights as citizens, are based on the fundamental beliefs and values we Americans share: equal respect, freedom, equality, and justice. Our rights are guaranteed to us by our Constitution and protected by our laws and our courts.

**Reading Check** How do the rights held by American citizens suggest the importance of “equal rights for all”?
**Duties of Citizens**

Just as a licensed driver has certain duties that go with the right to drive, citizens have duties, too. These duties include

- obeying the laws.
- defending the nation.
- serving on a jury or as a witness in court.
- paying taxes.
- attending school.

By performing each of these duties, we, as citizens, support our government’s efforts to meet our needs as a society.

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**Korematsu v. United States (1944)**

**Why It Matters** The main issue in this case is whether the government has the right to limit the civil rights of certain Americans during national emergencies. As the United States deals with the threat of terrorism, this question arises again today.

**Background** During World War II, the United States government forced thousands of Japanese and Japanese Americans to move to internment camps. The government feared that people of Japanese ancestry might help Japan attack the West Coast.

Toyoaburo Korematsu [KOR-eh-MAHT-soo], a native-born American citizen, refused to leave his home and go to the camps. He was arrested, charged with failure to report for relocation, and was convicted in federal district court. After losing in the Court of Appeals, he appealed to the United States Supreme Court.

**The Decision** The Court upheld the government’s action. It noted that national emergencies, such as war, may sometimes justify limiting the civil rights of a single racial group. The Court noted, however, that it is not justified to restrict civil rights because of racial ill will.

**Understanding the Law**

1. Why did the government feel justified in sending people of Japanese ancestry to internment camps?
2. Why is this case relevant as the United States struggles with the threat of terrorism?
Obeying the Law  Your family and your classroom have rules that keep them running in an orderly way. A society’s formal rules are called laws. Some laws are intended to keep us from hurting each other. They range from laws requiring drivers to stop at stop signs to laws against murder and armed robbery. Other laws establish the rules for making agreements and for settling disagreements. We also must obey laws that protect citizens’ rights.

The Rule of Law  In a democracy, no individual—even the President—is above the law. This concept of a government of laws, rather than of men and women, is called the rule of law. Officials must base their decisions on the law, not on personal opinion. If an official breaks the law, he or she must be treated like any other citizen. Our laws are also public, and citizens know the basic law of the land. This is an important protection against government tyranny.

Defending the Nation  Helping our country defend itself is another duty of citizens. The United States maintains armed services even in peacetime. In this way, the nation can defend itself in case of attack and can help other countries protect themselves.

When you are eighteen years old or older, you may volunteer to serve in the army, navy, air force, or marines. In addition, young men must register for military service when they reach age eighteen. Registering does not mean that they will have to serve in the armed forces, but it does mean that they can be called to serve when there is a national emergency. A man whose moral beliefs prohibit him from fighting may ask to be considered a conscientious objector. If his request is approved, he will be assigned to some other kind of public service, such as working in a hospital.

Armed Forces  A member of the armed forces passes out fliers to citizens interested in recruitment opportunities.

Draw Conclusions  Why is it important for citizens to serve in the armed forces?
As American citizens, we place great importance on our rights and freedoms. However, our government must depend on its citizens to support its institutions and help keep the country running smoothly and safely. Therefore, citizens have duties they must uphold.

a. Why is attending school an important duty of citizenship?

b. If citizens were not expected to carry out these duties, how would this affect the ability of our government to fulfill our needs? For example, what would society be like if citizens were not required to obey the law?

### Armed Forces Strength

- **Army**: 375,405
- **Navy**: 500,410
- **Marine Corps**: 380,491
- **Air Force**: 177,898

**SOURCE:** Department of Defense, 2003

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### Defending the Nation

Our country requires armed forces to protect itself and help other countries in need of military aid. It is expected that citizens will help defend the nation by joining the armed forces.

### Serving on a Jury

One basic right of citizens is the right to a fair trial. In our legal system, no person may be found guilty of a crime unless that guilt can be proved “beyond a reasonable doubt.” We believe that the best way to determine a person’s guilt or innocence is to conduct a trial, with citizens participating in the process.

Experts, such as lawyers, police officers, and psychologists, may play an important part in a criminal trial. However, experts do not make the final decision as to innocence or guilt. A judge does not make the final decision, either, unless the accused person gives such permission. Instead, our Constitution guarantees that anyone accused of a crime may have the case decided by a **jury of peers**—a group of ordinary citizens who hear the case and decide whether the accused person is innocent or guilty. The decision of the jury is based upon the evidence heard at the trial.

### Obeying the Law

Laws protect people and help ensure that people treat each other in fair and peaceful ways. A driver’s education class, for example, teaches you important motor vehicle laws. If drivers did not know and obey the laws, our streets and highways would be very dangerous places.
Serving as a Witness  During a trial, the lawyers on both sides may call witnesses to prove their case. **Witnesses are people who have seen events related to the crime or who have special information that may help determine the guilt or innocence of the person on trial.** Criminal trials use witnesses and juries. However, criminal trials are not the only ones that use witnesses and juries. Citizens may also ask a court to decide cases in which they think their rights have been violated or they have been treated unfairly. If two people cannot settle a dispute, for example, they can go to court. They can call witnesses to help them by testifying on their behalf.

As you can see, juries and witnesses play an important part in assuring that a trial is fair. Because Americans have a right to a fair trial, it is the duty of all adult citizens to serve as jurors and act as witnesses when they are called to do so.
**Paying Taxes** Are you a taxpayer? A few students earn enough money at part-time jobs or through savings accounts or investments that they pay income tax to the government. Many students pay sales tax on items they buy, such as clothes and CDs.

As an adult, you will pay other taxes as well. Through taxes, our local, state, and national governments raise money to pay for the services that citizens ask them to provide.

**Attending School** Every day that you go to school, you are performing one of your duties as a citizen. Society depends on schools to make sure that young people are prepared for the future.

Another important task of the schools is to give students the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need to carry out the duties and responsibilities of the “office of citizen.” Each of us must be educated about our history, our government, and the workings of our society.

**Reading Check** Why are public officials governed by the same rules and laws as ordinary citizens?

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For Cadet Lieutenant Colonel Khandi Johnson, serving her community is about “uplifting pride.” As Army JROTC Battalion Commander at Marlboro County High School in Bennettsville, South Carolina, Khandi trains new battalion members in drill and ceremony. She also serves as the JROTC spokesperson for Freedom’s Answer, a nonprofit organization that registers voters.

Khandi also sets aside time to serve as a volunteer. She has given her time and energy to many groups, such as the March of Dimes and Relay for Tots.

**Service Learning** How can you make a difference through organizations at your school?
Responsibilities of Citizens

As American citizens, we have responsibilities as well. Unlike duties, responsibilities are fulfilled by choice—they are voluntary. However, even though we are not required by law to fulfill our responsibilities, doing so is just as important a part of being a citizen as performing our duties.

Working Toward the Common Good The basic responsibility of citizens is to contribute to the common good, or the well-being of all members of society. Contributing to the common good means acting in ways that protect the rights and freedoms of other Americans and make our communities good places to live.

The responsibilities of citizenship include the many ways we participate in our political process. For example, as citizens we vote for government representatives. Some of us agree to hold office ourselves. We also work to influence government decisions.

Voting The right to vote is one of the basic rights of American citizens and one of our most important responsibilities. We vote for representatives at all levels of government, from President of the United States to members of the local school board.

In addition, in our states and our local communities, citizens are often asked to vote on public issues. We may be asked to make decisions about such issues as building more schools.
To make good decisions and vote wisely, citizens have the responsibility to inform themselves. You can get information by reading, asking questions, and discussing the candidates and issues with other people. It is always important, when preparing to vote, to try to both separate facts from opinions and base your decisions on reasons instead of personal likes and dislikes.

**Holding Government Office**  The people who agree to hold government office are fulfilling another important responsibility of citizenship. They have accepted the responsibility of learning about the issues and trying to make decisions that are in the best interests of the people they represent.

Citizens who hold office include our elected city council members, mayors, governors, and state and national representatives and senators. They also include appointed officials, such as members of local water boards and planning commissions, as well as advisors to the President.

**Participating in Election Campaigns** One important way to fulfill the responsibilities of citizenship is to help a candidate, or person running for office, in his or her election campaign. Emily Shultz describes the people who helped her father win public office:

“**When my father ran for election to the Kansas state House of Representatives, our neighbors really helped out. They wrote letters, made phone calls, and knocked on doors, telling people about my father and what a good representative he would be for our area.**

**When my father gave speeches, his campaign workers were there, handing out information.**

**And on election day they went around, reminding people to vote and driving them to their voting place. Thanks to them he was elected.**”

There are a number of ways that students might help a candidate. These include carrying a campaign sign at a rally, stuffing envelopes with information to send to voters, and making phone calls to encourage people to vote for your candidate.
Influencing Government  Another way in which you can fulfill the “office of citizen” is to persuade government to take action regarding a cause you believe in. Citizens of any age can influence government by expressing their opinions in letters to elected representatives and newspapers, and by speaking at city council and school board meetings. You can also join or create an organization that influences government. Here is Thomas Pham’s experience:

“One year some friends and I noticed that the trashcans in the school lunchroom were overflowing with cans and bottles that kids had thrown away. We went to the school board and asked them to provide special bins for cans and bottles. Now people can’t remember a time when there wasn’t recycling at the school.”

Serving the Community  Not all of the responsibilities of citizenship are directly connected with government. Each of us is responsible for doing whatever we can to make our communities better places to live in. When you listen with respect to the opinion of a person who disagrees with you, when you make a new student feel welcome in your school, or when you pick up a candy wrapper someone else dropped on the sidewalk, you are acting as a responsible citizen. You are fulfilling the “office of citizen” by contributing to the common good.

Reading Check  Why is it important to study and understand the issues that get decided in elections?

Assessment

Key Terms
Use each of the key terms in a sentence that explains its meaning: rule of law, jury of peers, witnesses, common good, candidate

Target Reading Skill
1. Identify Supporting Details Which supporting details in this section gave you a better understanding of the main idea?

Comprehension and Critical Thinking
2. Describe What are some of the rights that all American citizens share?

b. Make Generalizations Which values or beliefs are apparent in the rights guaranteed to American citizens?
3. a. Explain In what way are citizens obligated to defend the nation?
   b. Contrast How do witnesses differ from jurors?
4. a. Recall What responsibilities do citizens share in promoting the common good?
   b. Identify Alternatives What are some of the ways in which citizens can support a candidate running for office?

Writing Activity
You are the mayor of a small town. Your town needs improved upkeep of local streets and parks. Address your constituents in a speech. Propose a program that would improve the quality of life.

TIPS
• Make sure your speech identifies any problems in the community that need to be addressed.
• Make clear to your listeners that their involvement is essential.

Bette Midler, a singer and actress, is the founder of the New York Restoration Project, an organization that restores and maintains public parks in New York City.