

What Does It Mean to Be a Citizen?

Most of us think of citizenship as a political ideal. To be a citizen is to be a member of a political community, namely the nation-state. With it, of course, come certain legal rights (such as the rights of *habeas corpus*, the rights of free speech, the right to bear arms, and so on) as well as political responsibilities (such as the duty to participate in elections, to serve as a member of a jury, and the like). On the face of it, citizenship is rather straightforward, uncomplicated, and not all that interesting.

But citizenship is more than a legal designation. It is also a cultural ideal. It is infused with moral meaning, encompassed by normative principles, values, and expectations that all derive from the social, historical, and cultural context of the times.

How, for example, does one's identity as a citizen relate to other sources of identity—be they religious, ethnic, social class, familial, or professional? Do any of these rise in significance over citizenship, or does membership in a political community trump all others? And how might citizenship help to navigate these conflicts?

What is the meaning of citizenship in light of the power of the market? We are acutely aware of the role of money among special interest groups, lobbies, and political consultants. We are also sensitive to the effects of money on the political process itself, as in endorsements and advertising. Do these factors eclipse the historic place and role of the citizen in politics? Do citizens become extraneous to the workings of democracy? And what *did* President Bush mean when he declared that citizens demonstrate their patriotism in part by shopping? Does the involvement of “big money” undermine loyalty to political causes or parties? Does it contribute to apathy and cynicism?

Technology is yet another important factor that redefines the meaning of citizenship in the world today. The internet, as a hotbed of political communication and organization with extraordinary capacities to influence fundraising, voting behavior, and political activism, challenges all traditional notions of how citizens engage in the public sphere. While some people see this as a revitalization of democratic politics, others see online activity as having the potential to become a form of virtual and vicarious political action that inhibits real public engagement.

Add to this the growing frustration with the expansion of governmental bureaucracy. Such developments seem to undermine authentic connections for average citizens with their government, making many feel more like passive observers than active participants in self-government. For these, the possibility of meaningful engagement in the political process seems a good but old-fashioned idea that is simply no longer realistic. Politics has become just too complicated for the average person, so why not leave it to the experts?

Globalization only complicates matters further. Certainly, the boundaries of a political community in modern times have become considerably fuzzier, and as a result, there

are pressures to reconfigure the meaning of citizenship. Nowhere is this more in play than in the European Union. How does a person's membership in the E.U. relate to her status as a citizen of, say, Italy or France or Germany? At an extreme, these cross-currents seem to herald a new form of political community that will likely spread to other parts of the world. Already there are clear propensities toward pan-Arab and pan-Islamic identities that trump the identity associated with being a citizen of a particular nation. There are even those who speak quite seriously of themselves as "citizens of the world." What would citizenship possibly mean when the frame of reference is the world, and how would this role relate to being a citizen of a nation? Is it possible to be a citizen of the world, or is "the world" too broad and thin a concept to sustain citizenship?

What seemed at the start to be a fairly straightforward matter turns out to be considerably more complicated. With the prospect of a new American president soon to take office, it seems especially timely to consider anew the changing moral and political meanings of citizenship in the late modern world. It is to this end that this issue of *The Hedgehog Review* considers what it means to be a citizen today.

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