Individual Rights and Community Responsibilities

Pat Nanzer

Today, citizenship requires that people be knowledgeable about public issues and possess the capacity to work toward solution by acting together. History records voluntary actions by private citizens working together to right injustices, change directions and pursue benefits for the common good. This list includes the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, the civil rights movement. In every case, people voluntarily came together with a shared sense of purpose for the common good.

Definition

The concept of a **right** relates to the freedom from interference by other individuals or the government. **Individual rights** refer to the liberties of each individual to pursue life and goals without interference from other individuals or the government. Examples of individual rights include the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as stated in the United States Declaration of Independence.

A **community** is a group of people with common interests and values. Community is characterized by "wholeness incorporating diversity" and may include people of different ages, ethnicities, educational backgrounds and incomes (Gardner 2003). Individuals may be members of two or more communities; for example, one of geographic residence and another of employment.

**Community responsibilities** are an individual's duties or obligations to the community and include cooperation, respect and participation. The concept goes beyond thinking and acting as individuals to common beliefs about shared interests and life. A basic community responsibility is voting in
Each individual is part of a larger community. Family, neighbors, tribe, village, city, county, state, region, country and the world form a larger community in the life of every human being. At the same time, full human potential cannot be reached if individuality is suppressed by society.

In all free societies there is a constant and unavoidable tension between rights and responsibilities. Every right has a corresponding duty (U.S. Department of State).

It is the responsibility of the individual to watch over a community to make sure that standards are objective and beneficial to human life (Machan 2001).

Historic Roots

In 1787, Thomas Jefferson, the chief architect of the Declaration of Independence, urged the drafters of the Constitution to clearly identify the rights of the people. Jefferson believed past governments had been harsh and restrictive to the populace, governed questionable areas with no just power to act no jurisdictional authority and the result had been a reduction or loss of individual rights (U.S. Department of State). Like Jefferson, many of the founding fathers' generation feared the encompassing and absolute power of a federal government and demanded a Bill of Rights to protect the people and limit the powers of a federal government.

The Bill of Rights contains the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution and includes the basic privileges of all United States citizens. Many of the rights written in the amendments resulted from the shared experience of both the British and the American colonists under British rule. All the amendments reflect the close ties between personal freedom and democracy as versioned by the founding fathers' generation (U.S. Department of State). Over the years, the definition of some rights has
changed and new concepts, such as privacy, were added to the Constitution. But the rights of the people are the core of American democracy. In this way, the United States is unique in the world; its tradition of individual rights strongly reflects the American experience.

Good definitions of "rights" are often lacking and subject to interpretation. However, the Constitution provides a mechanism for interpretation by the Supreme Court. People may disagree with the Supreme Court regarding the meaning of a specific right, but adherence to the rules of law requires obedience to the interpretation by the Court. The justices of the Supreme Court are sworn to uphold constitutional law; their duty is to reflect and decide evolving notions or conflicts of rights. The Supreme Court is recognized as the chief agent for safeguarding constitutional rights and making decisions current with the needs of the time and society.

For more than two centuries, American democracy has fostered a wealth of creativity and ideas by people. Since its birth as a nation, America has been an abundant and reliable source of ideas that have empowered both individuals and communities. This characteristic was observed by Alex de Tocqueville when he visited America in 1831:

"These Americans are the most peculiar people in the world. You'll not believe it when I tell you how they behave. In a local community in their country, a citizen may conceive of some need [that] is not being met. What does he do? He goes across the street and discusses it with his neighbor. Then what happens? A committee begins functioning on behalf of that need. All of this is done by private citizens on their own initiative. The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens" (Tocqueville 1956, 201).

Importance

Citizenship today requires individuals be knowledgeable of public problems but, more important, have the capacity to act together toward their
solutions (Morse 1989). Voluntary actions by private citizens working together to right injustices, change directions and pursue benefits for the common good are noted throughout American history. This list includes the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, public education, community hospitals, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, the gay rights movement and the organization of migrant workers. In some cases, the movements' leaders achieved great fame and the respect of the nation and the world, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez. (Aviv 2003)

In every case, people voluntarily came together with a shared sense of purpose for the common good and with the intent of righting a wrong in the community. They also found like-minded people of goodwill. Groups formed alliances and multiplied their strength (Aviv 2003). In 1996, Robert Kennedy observed:

"Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance" (Robert F. Kennedy, former U.S. Attorney General (1925-1968), from a speech at the Day of Affirmation at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, June 1966).

Ties to the Philanthropic Sector

Philanthropic people and organizations, such as foundations, corporate grantmakers, individual donors and workplace-giving programs generously donate time, talent and money to support the efforts and fund the success of individuals and groups struggling to resolve community problems and promote human rights.

Nonprofit charitable organizations work to identify underlying causes of social problems and effect change to benefit the public. Many significant
social ideas of the past century in this country have been nurtured in the nonprofit sector (Gardner 2003). Nonprofit organizations fill gaps in areas such as social services, human rights and environmental protection. They may provide youth activities, feed the hungry, and shelter for homeless people. Nonprofit organizations reinforce both individualism and community responsibility by establishing an arena of action through which individuals can take the initiative to promote their own well-being and to advance the well-being of others in the community.

Individuals, as responsible members of their communities, may give their time and volunteer their services to help obtain needed improvements. Active participation on local school boards and parent-teacher associations improves educational services. Citizens can take an active part in the community by offering their knowledge and talents to different local organizations or committees. Participation in town meetings, public hearings and community projects is important for community improvement and identifying and solving problems (Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids 2003).

Key Related Ideas

The **Bill of Rights** is collectively the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, ratified on December 15, 1791, and guarantees certain freedoms and rights. The first eight amendments are the substantive and procedural individual rights. The 9th and 10th amendments are general rules of the relationships between the people, the state governments, and the federal government (Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids 2003).

**Civic Responsibility** means giving to the community in the pursuit of one's interest or task (Drucker 1999).

**Common Good** is a system in which people can - within the law - pursue their various respective visions of the common good and concurrently accomplish the kinds of mutual accommodation that make a social system
Individualism is the principle of people having the freedom to act on matters concerning them (Salamon 2002).

Social Capital refers to social networks of trust and reciprocity affecting the productivity of individuals and groups. By establishing connections among individuals, involvement in associations teaches norms of cooperation that transfer to political and economic life. The core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value (Putnam 2000).

Social Responsibility requires doing no harm to others in the pursuit of one's own interest or task (Drucker, 1999).

Solidarity is the principle of people having responsibilities not only to themselves, but also to their fellow human beings and to their communities (Salamon 1999).

Important People Related to the Topic

President Thomas Jefferson: President Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776, which proved to be the defining event in his life and legacy to the nation. Drawing on documents, such as the Virginia Declaration of Rights, state and local calls for independence and his own draft of a Virginia constitution, Jefferson wrote a stunning and eloquent statement of the colonists' right to rebel against the British government. It decreed the colonists' independence and right to self-government, based on the premise all men are created equal and have the unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (Library of Congress 2002).

President Abraham Lincoln: President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, as the United States was embattled and divided by the start of the third year of the Civil War. The proclamation became effective on January 1, 1863. The historic document freed all slaves
in the country, including slaves in rebelling confederate states that endorsed secession from the Union. Lincoln mandated enforcement of the proclamation by the Union military. Issuance and enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation nearly cost President Lincoln his presidency; it may have cost his life. His courage and wisdom paved the way for the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (December 1865), which ended slavery in the United States.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton met Susan B. Anthony in 1851 and for the next fifty years worked in close collaboration; Stanton articulated arguments for the improvement of women's legal and traditional rights; Anthony organized and campaigned to achieve these goals (The Anthony Center 2002).

Andrew Carnegie: Carnegie was perhaps the first wealthy man to state publicly the rich have a moral obligation to give away their fortunes. In 1889 he wrote _The Gospel of Wealth_, in which he asserted all personal wealth beyond that required to supply the needs of one's family should be regarded as a trust fund to be administered for the benefit of the community (Carnegie Corporation of New York).

Rosa Parks: Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, an action regarded as the beginning of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. "When I declined to give up my seat, it was not that day or bus in particular," Parks later told a biographer. "I just wanted to be free, like everybody else" (Hamilton 2003).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: King led a mass struggle for racial equality that changed America. King's address "I Have a Dream" delivered on the occasion of the March on Washington for Civil Rights on August 28, 1963, is one of the best-known American speeches of the twentieth century. In 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed legislation naming a federal holiday honoring King's birthday on the third Monday of every January.
Cesar Chavez: Chavez successfully represented the labor rights of farm workers, particularly Latino and Filipino, who suffered substandard wages and working conditions. In the 1960s and 1970s, his grassroots organization ballooned into a national movement; several campaigns, including a grape boycott, were observed by more than 17 million Americans (Cauldron 2002). Mr. Chavez had a powerful impact on the plight of hired and migrant agricultural workers and on public awareness of the workers. In the years following the boycotts, federal legislation and laws in many states were enacted to provide better wages, working conditions, education and housing.

Related Nonprofit Organizations

- The **Aspen Institute** seeks to foster enlightened leadership, the appreciation of timeless ideas and values and open-minded dialogue on contemporary issues. Through seminars, policy programs, conferences and leadership development initiatives, the Institute seeks to promote the pursuit of common ground and deeper understanding in a nonpartisan and no ideological setting. They try to help people balance conflicting values in order to find common ground with fellow citizens while remaining true to basic ideals ([http://www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org)).

- The **Independent Sector** was formed to celebrate the nonprofit and philanthropic community's unique role as distinct from government and business. Its mission is to promote, strengthen and advance the nonprofit and philanthropic community to foster private initiative for the public good. The "independent sector" is a diverse collection of more than one million charitable, educational, religious, health, and social welfare organizations. These groups create, nurture and sustain the values that frame American life and strengthen democracy ([http://www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org)).

- The **Council on Foundations** is a membership organization serving the public good by promoting and enhancing responsible and effective philanthropy ([http://www.cof.org](http://www.cof.org)).
Founded in 1956, the **Foundation Center** is the nation's leading authority on philanthropy and is dedicated to serving grantseekers, grantmakers, researchers, policymakers, the media and the general public ([http://fdncenter.org](http://fdncenter.org)).

Related Web Sites

**Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action** ([ARNOVA](http://www.arnova.org)), at [http://www.arnova.org](http://www.arnova.org), is "an international, interdisciplinary network of scholars and nonprofit leaders fostering the creation, application and dissemination of research on voluntary action, nonprofit organizations, philanthropy and civil society."


The **National Civic League**, at [http://www.ncl.org](http://www.ncl.org), advocates for the issues of community democracy, envisions a country where citizens are actively engaged in the process of self-governance and work in partnership with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors of society and where citizens are creating active civic culture reflective of the diversity of community voices.

The **Pew Partnership**, at [http://www.pew-partnership.org](http://www.pew-partnership.org), is a civic research organization with a mission to identify and document promising solutions crucial to strong communities.

The **Urban Institute**, at [http://www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org), is a nonpartisan economic and social policy research organization established to examine the social, economic and governance problems facing the nation. It provides information and analysis to public and private decision makers on these challenges and strives to raise citizen understanding of the issues and
Bibliography and Internet Sources

http://www.rochester.edu/SBA/suffragebios.html.


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