

# Citizenship—Rights & Responsibilities

Democracies rest upon the principle that government exists to serve the people; the people do not exist to serve the government. In other words, the people are citizens of the democratic state, not its subjects. While the state protects the rights of its citizens, in return, the citizens give the state their loyalty. Under an authoritarian system, on the other hand, the state, as an entity separate from the society, demands loyalty and service from its people without any reciprocal obligation to secure their consent for its actions.

When citizens in a democracy vote, for example, they are exercising their right and responsibility to determine who shall rule in their name. In an authoritarian state, by contrast, the act of voting serves only to legitimize selections already made by the regime. Voting in such a society involves neither rights nor responsibilities exercised by citizens—only a coerced show of public support for the government.

Similarly, citizens in a democracy enjoy the right to join organizations of their choosing that are independent of government and to participate freely in the public life of their society. At the same time, citizens must accept the responsibility that such participation entails: educating themselves about the issues, demonstrating tolerance in dealing with those holding opposing views, and compromising when necessary to reach agreement.

From the U.S Department of State

