

# Civic and Community Action I

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These two organizations concluded among other things that the citizen should be able to:

1. explain how citizens' voluntary efforts have strengthened democratic institutions over the course of American history; and,
2. explain the scope and patterns of voluntary action today-what citizens gain and contribute through such efforts and how civic involvement is important to a successful and fulfilling life.

## I. How has citizens' voluntary efforts strengthened democratic institutions?

Citizens...undertook many activities that in other nations were performed by governmental authorities. The work of settlers who created communities by clearing forests, forming militia, raising barns and establishing religious congregations generated a distinctive view that government rests on an active citizenry who take it upon themselves to care for common projects, beyond the designated functions of government. As the historians Oscar and Mary Handlin put it, "for the farmers and seamen, for the fishermen, artisans and new merchants, commonwealth repeated the lessons they know from the organization of churches and towns...the wisdom of common action."

In American history, 'public' mainly referred to the citizenry or political society as a whole, not simply government. The voluntary tradition produced three distinct ways of seeing civil society and the role of the public in relationship to the political process: the public was a deliberative body; the public was a problem solver; and the public was a group of civic-minded reformers.

Regarding problem-solving the public was a direct actor. This understanding of public was reflected in direct democracy, like the New England town meeting, which combined deliberation and action on public affairs. More informally, it appeared in our rich traditions of voluntary efforts that Alexis de Tocqueville observed when he traveled through the nation in the 1830s.

Immigrants from every corner of the world, he observed, brought with them strong practices of community action. In English history, for instance, problem solving by villagers about the exercise of the rights and upkeep of common lands, footpaths, flood-lands, and fishing areas,



as well as maintenance of common buildings like the village church, gave to middle-level peasantry a constant, daily schooling in rough democracy. Notice that these traditions flourished in a vast array of American voluntary activities-religious congregations that combined worship with community effort, barn raising, quilting bees, immigrant mutual aid groups and voluntary fire departments. They also generated organizations like the National Council of Negro Women, 4-H, the Red Cross, the YMCA, the YWCA, and Rotary. Americans looked to their own initiative, rather than large governmental or business organizations, to undertake voluntary projects concerned with addressing public problems. Indeed, most functions later assumed by government were first designed and developed in community initiatives.

