

Chapter 11

What does it take to be a good citizen?

It starts with voting . . .

When people talk about being a good citizen, the first thing they think of is voting. That's because voting is the most basic act of citizenship. When immigrants become citizens, they nearly always take great pride in being able to vote. They are right to feel this way. There's really nothing more important than the act of marking a ballot and making an informed choice about who we want to lead us.

. . . But that's just the tip of the iceberg

Voting is only part of the story. In fact, government is only a part of the story. To be good citizens, we have to think about the whole of our lives—about how we treat the people around us, how well we take care of the natural world, and what impact all our actions will have on the future.



*WHAT DOES
SNOOPY HAVE TO
DO WITH BEING
A GOOD CITIZEN?*

We don't always agree. We're not all alike. That's OK.

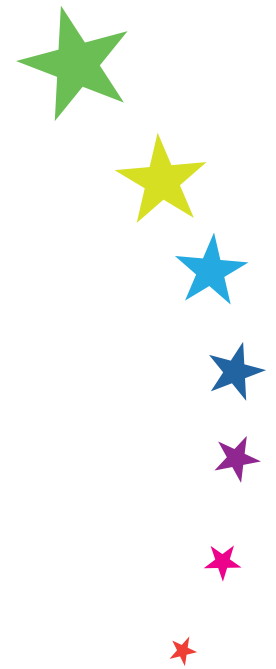
To live in an open, democratic society, we have to accept that not everyone will share our beliefs. (When a society includes and embraces people who have a variety of backgrounds and beliefs, it's called *pluralism*.) In fact, it helps if we all enjoy this diversity. If we only spend time with people who think and act just like us, we would never hear about new ideas that might be better than our own. In the long history of human life, the most progress has always been made when people are exposed to new ideas and new ways of looking at things—even if those new ways of thinking seem hard to understand at first.

Habits of mind: thinking about how we think

But voting and being open to new ideas are just the beginning. Being a good citizen also requires striving to develop certain habits of mind and ways of living. Here's one list of traits and habits that contribute to good citizenship. You may think of others that should be added.

1. Try to be a person of good character.

Good people make good citizens. Being a good person means being kind and honest, paying attention to other people's needs, respecting yourself and others, and working hard. None of us is perfect, so we also need to face up to our faults and strive to overcome them.





2. Love to learn.

The best way to help make the world a better place is to keep learning all you can about it. Knowledge is power. For instance, the more we know about salmon, rivers, and oceans, the more likely we will be able to save both the salmon and the natural world that sustains us.

3. Learn science.

Science and technology are changing our world so fast it's hard to keep up with it. To make sure these changes benefit all of us, we will need citizens who understand science and can govern the way we use it.

4. Don't feel you have to know everything.

No one knows everything. It's important to understand the big ideas and principles of democracy, but if you don't remember all the details about which court does what, or how many people are on a city council, don't worry. You can relearn those facts when you need them.

5. Get to know your neighbors.

Democracy depends on people having a sense of community. When neighbors know each other and help each other, they are more likely to participate in activities that make their neighborhoods safer, better places for kids to grow up to be good people.

6. Spend time with people of different cultures and colors.

People often feel shy about getting to know people from other cultures or races. But if you let your curiosity overcome your shyness, you will be rewarded with new friends and a deeper understanding of what life is like for them.



This is important because no one racial or cultural group will be a majority by about 2050. We will all need to learn about each other's cultures so we can work together to keep our democracy strong.

7. Know your rights and stand up for them.

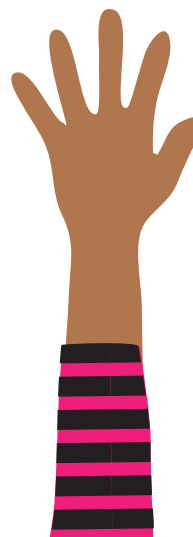
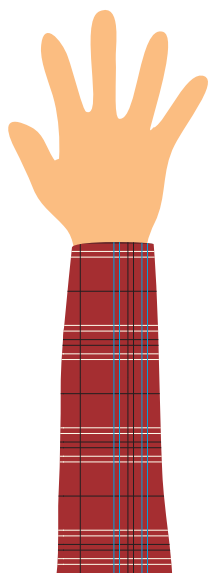
This is why it's important to learn civics: you can only stand up for your rights when you know what they are. When people stand up for their rights, it keeps democracy strong. Speaking up when we see or experience bullying, racism, sex discrimination, or other forms of injustice also helps keep our country moving forward in the quest to truly be a place where all people are equal.

8. Participate in the life of your community.

There are lots of activities that help democracy that aren't about politics or elections. Charities, religious groups, sports, book clubs, music, and art all contribute to making communities healthy places to live. This supports democracy by helping us be a society where people know how to get along with one another.

9. Think about the common good and individual liberty.

As human beings, we are all constantly trying to find the right balance between doing what we want to do and doing what's best for the people around us. This is true in our family lives, in our schools, in our workplaces, and in our government. Being a good citizen requires thinking carefully about what's best for all of us as well as what's best for each of us.



10. Lean toward optimism.

To make democracy succeed, we have to share the belief that human beings are capable of resolving differences peacefully, respecting each other, and putting aside selfish interests. But when people do things that are mean, corrupt, or hateful, it can make all of us wonder if democracy really works. When this happens, we have to remind ourselves of the progress our country has made. We have to stay focused on living up to the ideals in our Constitution.

11. Think of yourself as a powerful person.

You are. As a citizen of the world's most powerful democracy, each American has more political power than a hundred citizens of a smaller, less prosperous democratic country—and thousands of times more powerful than citizens who live under corrupt or undemocratic governments. When we vote for president, we are voting for someone who will have an impact around the world—not just on our fellow Americans. This is a huge responsibility.

12. Question authority.

In fact, question everything. Democracy depends on people asking hard questions and insisting on honest answers. If this country's founders hadn't questioned the authority of the British, we would still be curtsying to the queen.

13. Don't waste time hating government.

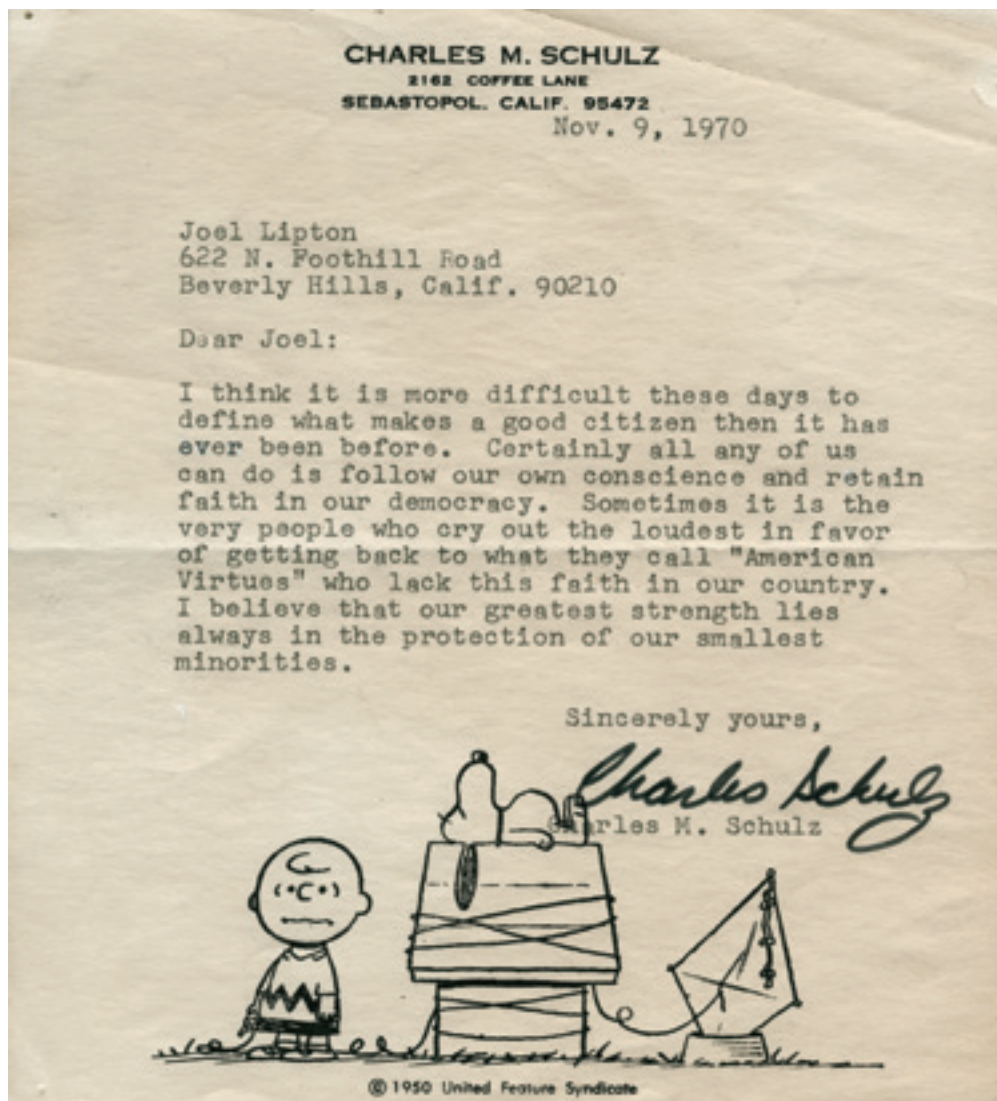
Lots of people will tell you that government is no darn good, and that it wastes tax dollars and interferes with people's lives. Or they might say government is no darn good because it's all controlled by rich people and big businesses. These statements may point out problems that need to be solved, but they sure don't



help solve them. Complaining about something doesn't change it. And in a democracy, hating the government is a kind of self-hatred, because we're the ones who elect our government leaders.

14. Keep the faith.

What makes democracy work is that we all believe in it. If people stop believing in democracy, it will die. All the progress our country has made—from outlawing slavery and extending voting rights to everyone, to making the 40-hour workweek a legal standard—happened because people believed that they could create change. They were right.



Way back in 1970, students in a 5th grade class were given a homework assignment: write to someone you admire and ask them, "What makes a good citizen?"

Joel was 10, and a huge *Peanuts* comic fan. He wrote to Charles Schulz, the man who created and drew *Peanuts*. This is the letter Charles Schulz wrote back to Joel.

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