

Being an active citizen

This topic explainer discusses what being an active citizen means and ways that you can participate in your local democracy.

🎯 Learning goals

- Australian citizens have political rights they benefit from and responsibilities in return for those rights.
- Active citizens use their non-obligatory political rights to engage with the democratic system.

≡ Curriculum links

Year 7 AC9HC7K02

What is democracy and citizenship?

Democracy means rule by the people. The word comes from the ancient Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power). A democratic country has a system of government where people have the power to participate in decision-making. It is also a system of government in which people vote their elected representatives into parliament.

A citizen is a person who is a member of a country and has the rights and protection of the country, as well as responsibilities to it. Citizenship is the name for that relationship between a citizen and their country.

Citizens' rights and responsibilities

A **right** is a legal or moral entitlement of a person within a system. As a citizen, these are the entitlements that come from being part of a country. There are two types of rights:

- Social and economic rights (to live with dignity), such as the right to food, housing, healthcare, education, and safety.
- Civil and political rights (to participate freely and fully in society), such as the right to vote, protest, and freedoms including speech, expression, and religion.

A **responsibility** is an obligation a person has to something else in exchange for some sort of benefit. As a citizen, these are obligations to the country you belong to in exchange for enjoying its rights and protections. These can include the responsibility to:

- Obey the law
- Serve on a jury
- Vote in elections
- Defend the country, if required



Active citizenship

Being an active citizen means to participate in things in a country that you have a right to engage with but are not obliged to do so. In a democratic country such as Australia, one of these non-obligatory interactions includes participating in the processes of parliament.

Participating in the territory Assembly

There are four ways Canberrans can participate in the work of the ACT Legislative Assembly:

- **Start or sign a petition:** Anyone who lives in the ACT can start or sign a petition asking the Assembly to act on an issue. Petitions with 500 or more signatures are automatically sent to a committee which may choose to look into your request in depth.

You can sign or start petitions online: epetitions.parliament.act.gov.au

- **Share your views on an inquiry:** Committees – small groups of MLAs who do the detailed work of the Assembly – often ask the public for their views on important issues. You can share yours by writing a submission and sending it to the committee. You may also be invited to talk to the committee in person at a public hearing.

Past inquiries have explored topics such as community sports, skate parks, selecting a faunal (animal) emblem to represent the ACT, and youth mental health.

You can view inquiries open for submission online:

parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/inquiries

- **Contact your local members:** There are five members who represent the five electorates (voting districts) of the ACT. You can contact them by email, phone, social media, or talk to them at community events or their mobile offices.

You can find members by suburb online: parliament.act.gov.au/members/find

- **Stand for election:** Any citizen 18 years or older and registered to vote can stand for election to the Legislative Assembly as either a member of a party or an independent.



Except for standing for election, non-citizens (including new migrants and permanent residents) can also participate in all these ways!

Participating in the federal parliament

You can participate in the federal parliament in all the same ways as the territory Assembly.

- Start or sign a petition: aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/petitions
- Inquiries open for submission: aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Submissions_Open



- Find your local members and senators:
aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/Contacting_Senators_and_Members 

Classroom activities

There is an in-class activity associated with this topic available on our website:

- [Activity: Write a letter about a local issue](#) ( PDF 150KB)

Other resources

There are a range of other helpful resources available on this topic, the best of which we have compiled below:

- [\[ACT\] Guide: Writing a submission](#) (parliament.act.gov.au )
- [\[ACT\] Guide: Information about protesting](#) (parliament.act.gov.au )