

What are my responsibilities as a citizen?



Chapter 31

Being a Responsible Citizen

Chapter Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to

- **recognize** the importance of voting in elections.
- **explain** how laws are made.
- **name** the two categories of laws in the United States.
- **determine** situations that might require the services of a lawyer.
- **state** the rights and responsibilities of consumers.

Key Concepts

- Citizens express themselves on public issues by voting.
- Laws protect the rights of citizens.
- A lawyer helps you to interpret laws that affect you as a citizen.
- You have both rights and responsibilities as a consumer.

Key Terms

citizen
register
bill
civil laws
public laws
monopoly
competition
recourse

citizen

A person who owes allegiance to a government.



Making a Difference

Consider participating in youth civic groups and community service projects. These are excellent ways to develop leadership skills and civic responsibility. There are many local, state, national, and international civic and community service organizations that are geared to youth participation. Some of these groups include Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of the USA, 4-H, Police Explorers, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and the Civil Air Patrol Cadet Program.

register

To submit one's name to the official list of citizens eligible to vote in elections.

Being an Active Citizen

A **citizen** is a person who owes allegiance to a government. As a citizen of the United States, you have many rights and responsibilities. Your rights are protected by the laws of the government. You are responsible for obeying those laws.

As a citizen you have an opportunity to be an active citizen. You can do this by trying to make your community better by participating in civic organizations. By volunteering your time and talents, you can help to improve life for yourself as well as other citizens.

The Right to Vote

One of the most important rights of U.S. citizens is the right to vote. The law does not force citizens to vote. It simply gives them the opportunity to do so. See 31-1.

In general, any citizen of the United States who is at least 18 years old has the right to vote. It is the responsibility of each citizen to exercise that right. Voting is one way to express yourself on public issues. If you are eligible, you should vote in national, state, and local elections.

The people who are elected to office make and enforce the laws. As a responsible citizen, you should vote to elect people who will support the kinds of laws you support. When you vote for someone, you are saying, "I want this person to represent me in government." You are also saying, "I think this person will do the best job for the town (or state or nation)."

In order to vote, you must register. When you **register**, you add your name to the official list of citizens eligible to vote in elections. To be eligible, you must be at least 18 years old. You must be a citizen of the United States. You must have lived in the state and county where you are registering for at least 30 days prior to the election. When you go to vote, election officials check to see if your name is on the list of registered voters. If it is, you can vote.

**31-1**

Exercising the right to vote gives citizens a chance to participate in their government.

You can register to vote at the office of the county commissioner, the election supervisor, or the municipal clerk. Just before a major election, mobile units for voter registration may visit your neighborhood. They are run by representatives of political parties. They want all eligible citizens to be registered so they can vote in the upcoming election.

Sometimes situations arise that may prevent a registered voter from being able to vote on the day of the election. The voter may be hospitalized, on vacation, a member of the military, a student away from home, or unable to vote on election day for reasons of employment. *Absentee voting* allows registered voters to vote by absentee ballot in any election in which they are qualified to vote. If you have a question about whether you qualify to vote absentee or how to apply, contact your local election office.



Your Reading

Why is it important to vote?

The Laws of the Land

Laws are rules by which people live. A society could not function if people did whatever they desired. Living in a society without laws results in total confusion and turmoil.

As a citizen, you have many rights that are protected by laws. If your rights are violated, the laws outline what course of action you may take to correct the situation. As a citizen, you also have a responsibility to obey laws. If you fail to do so, the laws define what penalties you will face.

How Laws Are Made

Laws are made by the legislative branches of the various levels of government. Lawmakers at every level are elected to public office. Federal laws are made by the United States Congress, 31-2. State laws are made by state legislatures. Local laws are made by town or city councils.

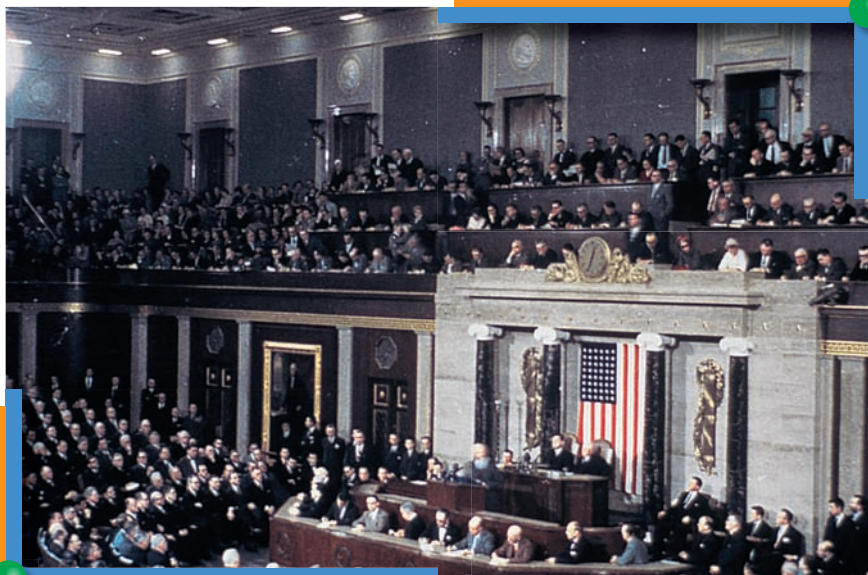
To make a new state law, a state legislator introduces a bill to the members of the legislature. A **bill** is a proposed law. The members of the legislature discuss the proposed law. They discuss the reasons for having the law and the reasons for not having the law. This discussion is called a *debate*. During the debate period or before the vote, there is a public comment period. During this period, you, as a citizen, have the right to have your opinion heard. You can do this either in person or in writing. The members of the legislature vote on the bill. If it passes, it is sent to the governor. Once the governor signs it, it becomes a law.

Federal laws are made in a similar way. A bill is introduced. If it is passed by both the Senate and the House of Representatives, it is sent to the president. Once the president signs a bill, it becomes a law.

bill
A proposed law.

31-2

The U.S. Congress is responsible for making laws at the national level.



Sometimes a proposed law is presented directly to citizens as a question. These questions appear on voting ballots as *propositions* or *public questions*. When citizens go to the polls to vote for public officials, they may also vote on one or more public questions. If the majority of voters accept a public question, it becomes law. If people vote down a public question, it does not become law.

Another method of making laws is sometimes used on the local level. A town council member may introduce a bill by reading it at a public meeting. The bill is then printed in the local newspaper. The bill is read again at a second public meeting. Citizens are given time to make comments and express their opinions about the bill. After the discussion period, the council members vote on the bill. If passed, it becomes a law.

Types of Laws

The laws in the United States are divided into two categories—civil laws and public laws. **Civil laws** define a person's rights in relation to other people. Civil laws relate to cases involving such issues as contracts, inheritances, and the business of corporations. **Public laws** define a person's rights in relation to government. Public laws are divided into four groups.

- *Criminal law* relates to punishments for failure to obey the law.
- *Constitutional law* refers to the basic laws of the nation.
- *Administrative law* pertains to the duties and powers of the executive branch of government. The executive branch includes the highest office at each level of government. Presidents, governors, and mayors are members of the executive branches of federal, state, and local governments, respectively.
- *International law* relates to the relationships among nations.

civil laws

Laws that define a person's rights in relation to other people.

public laws

Laws that define a person's rights in relation to government.



Your Reading

How does a bill become a law?



Community Connections

Conduct research to determine the legal costs of the following: buying or selling a house, getting a divorce, defending yourself in a court case, and writing a will. (Some fee ranges for these services may be given in online sources, too.) Share your results with the class.

When You May Need a Lawyer

At some point, you may need a lawyer to help you interpret the laws that affect you as a citizen. If you need help finding a lawyer, you might ask friends and family members. They may be able to recommend lawyers they have used. You could also look in the Yellow Pages of the phone book for a listing of attorneys in your area. When looking in the phone book, you may find a number for a state legal association. Such an association is another source of help for finding a lawyer to meet your specific legal needs.

Lawyers specialize in the types of legal services they offer. Some lawyers specialize in defending criminal cases. Some deal primarily with tax laws or corporate lawsuits. Others primarily handle divorce cases. When choosing a lawyer, it is important to look for one who is qualified to deal with your particular type of problem. See 31-3.

Legal advice can be quite costly. Ask about fees before you hire an attorney. If you are unable to afford a lawyer, you may be able to get free legal help from a public service agency.

31-3

Lawyers generally specialize in a specific legal area, such as real estate transactions, divorces, or personal injury.



You might want to seek the advice of a lawyer if you are involved in any of the following situations:

- If you buy or sell a house, a lawyer will review all the legal documents involved. He or she can make sure that your best interests are being served.
- If you get a divorce, a lawyer can help you arrive at a fair settlement.
- If you rent an apartment and wish to break the lease, a lawyer can help you understand your options.
- If you buy a service or product and fail to receive it, a lawyer can help you resolve the problem.
- If you receive a summons or subpoena to appear in court, you may need the services of a lawyer to protect your rights.
- If you are arrested, you may need a lawyer to defend you and represent you in court.
- If you wish to make out a will, a lawyer can help make sure it is a valid document.
- If a loved one dies, you may need a lawyer to help settle the estate.



Your Reading

How can a lawyer help you as a citizen?

Consumer Rights and Responsibilities

As a citizen of the United States, you are entitled to participate in the economy. You do this by working to produce goods and services. You also participate by consuming goods and services produced by others.

The economy of the United States is based on free enterprise. To make this economic system work, both businesses and consumers must be treated fairly. Many laws have been passed to protect the free enterprise system. As a result, you have both rights and responsibilities as a consumer.

The Right to Information

As a consumer, you have the right to accurate information. Product labels, claims, and advertisements must be truthful. Instructions for the use and care of products must be clear and understandable, 31-4.

Along with this right to information comes the responsibility to use it. You should read product labels and service contracts. You should compare items carefully. Know what to expect from a product or service before you pay for it. Once you buy a product, follow the instructions for its use and care.

The Right to Choose

You and other consumers have the right to choose from a variety of products and services. The government protects that right with laws against monopolies. A *monopoly* is total control over a product or service.

monopoly

The exclusive possession and control of a product or service.

31-4

Consumers have the right to expect clear and accurate directions on product packages.



Suppose Company AZ held a monopoly on cars in the United States. In that case, the company would be the sole U.S. manufacturer and seller. Company AZ might decide to make only two-door, compact cars to save money. Meanwhile, the company would charge whatever price it desired. If you wanted a car, you would have to buy an AZ car at a fixed price.

The government has laws against monopolies to encourage a variety of products and services to exist. When monopolies are outlawed, competition reigns. **Competition** is the effort of two or more parties acting independently to offer the most favorable product or terms at the fairest price.

Variety is a sign of a free enterprise economy. You and other consumers have the responsibility to select wisely. You should compare different features, qualities, and prices. Then make choices that best meet your needs. See 31-5.

competition

Two or more parties acting independently to offer the most favorable product or terms.

The Right to Safety

Consumers have the right to be protected from unsafe products. You can expect foods, drugs, toys, appliances, and tools to be safe.

You also have the responsibility to use products safely. Use them as they are meant to be used. Do not share prescription drugs. Do not use items past their expiration dates. Follow directions for the safe use of products that are potentially

**31-5**

Consumers have the right to choose from a variety of products.

dangerous. You also have the responsibility to report products that you find to be unsafe. Notify the store where you bought the product. Notify the product's manufacturer. You may also want to notify an appropriate government office.

The Right to Be Heard

recourse

The right to complain and receive an appropriate response.

If you buy a product or service, and it does not meet your expectations, you have the right to recourse. *Recourse* is the right to complain and receive an appropriate response.

If you purchase an item that is defective, you should return it to the store where you purchased it. Bring the merchandise and the sales receipt. It is a good practice to save the receipts from all your purchases.

Most stores have a customer service representative. You should explain to that person the problem you have with the merchandise. He or she will follow the store's policy for defective merchandise. Most stores will exchange the item for another. Some stores will issue a store credit for the returned item. You can use that credit to buy something else from the store. Many stores will refund your money. It is a good practice to inquire about a store's return policy before you make a purchase.

If you are not satisfied with the response of the customer service representative, ask to speak to the supervisor. If after talking to the supervisor, you are still not satisfied, ask to see the store manager. You should be prepared to go as far as necessary to reach satisfaction.

If your problem is not resolved by the store manager, write a detailed letter to the main office of the company. In your letter, explain in detail the facts pertaining to the problem. List the names of all the people to whom you spoke, and describe their responses to your problem. Also state in your letter what you expect from them to bring the matter to a satisfactory close. See 31-6. If you still do not get satisfaction, consider contacting the area's Better Business Bureau (BBB).

For matters that may involve unlawful behavior, contact the consumer protection bureau in your city or state. This department is usually located within the office of the attorney general. The name of the protection group can be found in the telephone book.

323 W. Taft Drive
 South Holland, IL 60473
 May 18, 20XX
 Nancy Milan
 Consumer Services
 Contemporary Communications, Inc.
 2121 West Main Street
 Mesa, AZ 85201

Dear Ms. Milan:

One month ago, I purchased a Smart Talk Cordless Telephone from your Contemporary Communications Collection, Model #012988. This purchase was made at the Phone Connections store in South Holland, Illinois.

To my disappointment, the quality of the newly purchased telephone did not live up to its reputation. After only one month of use, the signal is weak and there is static on the line.

To solve my problem, I ask that you please replace my Smart Talk Cordless telephone. It would be greatly appreciated. Please find a copy of my purchase receipt and warranty enclosed.

I hope to hear from you soon with a resolution to my problem. I will wait another month for your response before I return the phone to the Phone Connections store for full reimbursement. You may contact me at the above address or by phone at 708-555-7200. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Sims

Jennifer Sims

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Generally, the BBB and a government agency will not handle the same complaint at the same time. If you do not get satisfaction through one channel, you may contact the other. Send copies of all your correspondence and ask for their review of the matter. If you still do not get satisfaction, you may need to retain the services of a lawyer to help resolve your problem.

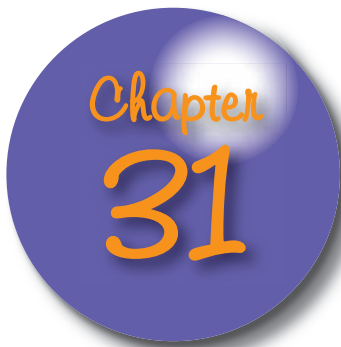
31-6

A complaint letter written to the manufacturer will often resolve a consumer's problem with a faulty product.



Your Reading

How do laws designed to protect the free enterprise system help consumers and businesses?

A circular graphic with a purple background and a white glow effect. The word "Chapter" is written in a light orange, sans-serif font at the top. Below it, the number "31" is written in a large, bold, orange font.

Summary

Citizenship involves both rights and responsibilities. One of the most important rights of U.S. citizens is the right to vote. To exercise this right, you must register first.

Laws are rules by which people live. They are made by the people elected to public office. The two categories of laws in the United States are civil laws and public laws. At various times in your life, you may need the services of a lawyer to help you interpret laws.

Another part of being a responsible citizen involves being a responsible consumer. Consumers have rights and responsibilities related to product information, selection, safety, and recourse. If you buy an item that is defective, there are certain steps to follow to solve the problem.

Reviewing Key Concepts

1. True or false. The law requires every eligible U.S. citizen to vote in all elections.
2. True or false. To register to vote, a person must be a citizen of the United States and at least 18 years old.
3. True or false. Federal laws are made by the United States Congress.
4. Name and define the two categories of laws in the United States.
5. List three sources of help for finding a lawyer.
6. List four situations that may require the services of a lawyer.
7. Describe consumers' rights and responsibilities related to product information.
8. Explain how the government protects the rights of consumers to choose from a variety of goods and services.
9. List three responsibilities consumers have concerning product safety.
10. If you have a problem with an item you purchased, you should first contact _____.
 - A. the Better Business Bureau
 - B. the store's manager
 - C. the store's customer service representative
 - D. a lawyer

Building Academic Skills

Social Studies. Obtain a copy of the Bill of Rights. Read it and write a paragraph summary about what these rights mean to you. List any questions you still have regarding your rights as a U.S. citizen.

Building Technology Skills

1. Research how laws are made online. Use presentation software to explain the process of how an idea becomes a law. Show the presentation to the class.
2. Conduct online research to determine the latest product safety recalls by using the following Web sites: cpsc.gov, fda.gov/opacom/7alerts.html, and fsis.usda.gov/Fsis-Recalls/index.asp. Write a report on five products or safety issues being addressed in the Web sites.
3. Conduct online research on the Better Business Bureau to find out if there is a local branch in the community. Report the services they provide and the process for obtaining those services.

Building Career Knowledge and Skills

1. Research the right to vote in a country other than the United States. Find out what percentage of eligible voters voted in the last U.S. presidential election. Include this information in a written report along with your own ideas about the right to vote.
2. Prepare a pamphlet describing why, how, and where a person should register to vote. Distribute copies of the pamphlet throughout your school and community.

3. Contact a local election office and ask for information on who may vote using an absentee ballot. How do you apply for an absentee ballot? Discuss your findings in class.
4. Design a bulletin board showing the steps involved in making a federal law.
5. Describe a situation that might require the services of a lawyer. Make a list of the kinds of information a person in this situation would need to bring to the lawyer.
6. Ask class members to play the parts of customer service representatives, store managers, presidents of companies, and customers. Create different situations for making and resolving complaints.
7. Interview someone who has faced a consumer problem and has taken steps to correct it. Describe the problem, the steps taken to correct the problem, and the final outcome. Share your findings with the class.

Building Workplace Skills

Working with three or four classmates, write a skit that demonstrates a store's reluctance to grant a consumer's right to be heard. Include actions a consumer can take at all levels of a store's management until a consumer is satisfied. Incorporate characters into the skit so that each member of your team also performs in the skit. Have the class evaluate whether the consumer problem demonstrated in the skit was appropriately handled in the end.