

# Citizenship

## History

Citizenship is a very old idea from the classical Greek and Roman worlds. The term was based on the Latin *civitas*, meaning people living in a city. In the Greek city-state or polis, citizenship was the privileged status of the ruling group of men who had full and equal rights to decide what measures should be taken to achieve the collective good of all people in the community.

Citizenship was more about responsibilities that had to be met, rather than rights that could be claimed. Women, children, resident foreigners, some labourers and slaves were all excluded. In the Roman world, citizenship was not restricted to members of any particular ethnic group and citizenship could be conferred in recognition of services.

Full citizenship comprised six privileges. Four of these were public rights: service in the army, voting in the assembly, eligibility to public office and the legal right of action and appeal. The other two were the private rights of intermarriage and trade with other Roman citizens.

Sometimes a distinction has been drawn between the formal or legal status (citizenship) and a broader practical citizenship, based on how a person can act to be a 'good citizen'.

## Australian Citizenship

To be a member of the Western Australian Parliament, a person must be an Australian citizen. To be eligible to vote for state (as well as federal or local) elections, it is also necessary to be an Australian citizen. In Australia, it is compulsory for citizens to enrol to vote and then vote at state and federal elections.

Visit [www.waec.wa.gov.au](http://www.waec.wa.gov.au) (WA Electoral Commission) or [www.aec.gov.au](http://www.aec.gov.au) (Australian Electoral Commission) for more information on how to enrol to vote.

Most people born in Australia automatically become citizens with full legal entitlements at 18 years of age.



Flag of Australia

There are many legal provisions for people seeking to gain citizenship. The residence period to be naturalised as a citizen, subject to certain exemptions, is four years. On 1 July 2007, the Australian Citizenship Act replaced the 1948 Act of the same title. From 1 October 2007, persons applying for Australian citizenship must first pass a citizenship test. The resource book, *Australian Citizenship: Our Common Bond* names a number of Australia's democratic beliefs, rights and liberties, including:

### Democratic beliefs

- Parliamentary democracy
- The rule of law
- Living peacefully
- Respect for all individuals regardless of background
- Compassion for those in need

### Freedoms

- Freedom of speech and freedom of expression
- Freedom of association
- Freedom of religion and secular government
- Equality in Australia
- Equality of men and women
- Equality of opportunity



# Citizenship

Australian citizens enjoy the following rights, again subject to certain exemptions. These include the right to:

- vote in federal and state or territory elections, and in a referendum;
- apply for work in the Australian Public Service or in the Australian Defence Force;
- seek election to Parliament;
- apply for an Australian passport and re-enter Australia freely;
- receive help from an Australian official while overseas; and
- register children born overseas as Australian citizens by descent.

The broad meaning of citizenship carries with it an ideal of participating as a member of society.

One definition of a citizen is 'a person furnished with knowledge of public affairs, instilled with attitudes of civic virtue, and equipped with skills to participate in the political arena'.

Some of the avenues open to be active citizens include:

- being well-informed and often prepared to volunteer your services for a cause;
- obeying the law of the land and having the skills to democratically seek changes to the law;
- when eligible, voting in both Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council elections;
- preparing a petition to be presented by a member of Parliament;
- writing a submission to a parliamentary committee that is investigating a policy matter;

- contacting your MLA or MLC;
- writing, telephoning, faxing or emailing a department, statutory authority or agency about a matter of concern;
- writing to the editor of a major newspaper or community newspaper to express concern or support for a policy;
- telephoning or emailing a talkback radio announcer about a matter of concern;
- organising a public meeting;
- contacting an existing association or union that may be able to assist you;
- joining or forming a political party;
- forming or assisting a pressure or lobby group;
- hiring a professional lobbyist to make representations to government members and parliamentarians as the need arises; and
- conducting research or analysis. A key to success may be a well-researched proposal.



Image courtesy of the Western Australian Electoral Commission

More information about Australian citizenship and an electronic copy of the Australian Citizenship: Our Common Bond resource book is available from [www.citizenship.gov.au](http://www.citizenship.gov.au).

