

The Bill of Rights

What freedoms does the Bill of Rights protect and why are they important?

Introduction

To James Madison, the creation of the Constitution seemed nothing less than “a miracle.” By 1788, however, it appeared that it would take another miracle to get it adopted. The adoption of the Constitution depended on ratification, or approval, by 9 of the 13 states. Ratification started off smoothly, with Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut all saying yes. But in Massachusetts, opposition ran strong.

At the Massachusetts ratification convention in 1788, defeat seemed certain. Opponents objected to the Constitution's lack of rights for the people, and many delegates refused to support ratification unless such rights were added.

In desperation, the Constitution's supporters, the Federalists, looked to John Hancock, the governor of Massachusetts. Hancock had stayed away from the convention, pleading a painful attack of gout (a form of arthritis) in his feet, but he was actually waiting to make an appearance until he could be sure he would be on the winning side.

To convince Hancock to attend, the Federalists took advantage of his vanity. Virginia, they hinted, might not ratify the Constitution, and if it did not, then George Washington, a Virginian, could not run for president. If Washington did not run, Hancock was the next best choice.

Hancock swallowed the bait. In a dramatic speech, he urged the delegates to approve the Constitution and he assured them that the new Congress would amend the Constitution by adding a bill of rights.

The vote was close, but Massachusetts chose to ratify. The Federalists' strategy, “Ratify now, amend later,” also worked well in other states. By the end of 1788, the Constitution was the law of the land.

In this lesson, you will learn how Federalists kept their promise to add a list of rights to the Constitution. You will also learn about the freedoms protected by the Bill of Rights and why they are important.

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Social Studies Vocabulary

Bill of Rights

defendant

double jeopardy

due process

self-incrimination

warrant

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For all his hopes, John Hancock never got to be president. By a narrow vote, Virginia did ratify the Constitution. In the first presidential election, held in 1789, George Washington became the nation's first president. John Adams of Massachusetts became the vice president.

When the first Congress met that year, no one seemed in much of a hurry to amend the Constitution. Representative James Madison, however, did not forget the promises made during the ratification debate. Originally, he had opposed adding a bill of rights to the Constitution because such a listing seemed unnecessary to him. However, Thomas Jefferson helped change his mind. In a letter to Madison, Jefferson argued that “a bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on Earth . . . and what no just government should refuse.”

Debate and Approval in Congress While Congress debated other issues, Madison sifted through nearly 100 proposed amendments. He chose those that seemed least *controversial*, or least likely to cause conflict, and presented them to Congress on June 8, 1789.

Critics jumped on Madison's proposals as meaningless “milk-and-water” cures for imaginary problems. The debate that followed was, in Madison's words, “extremely difficult.” As months dragged on with no agreement, he wrote that the task had become a “nauseous project.” Still, he persevered until Congress approved 12 amendments.

Ratification by the States Under the Constitution, three-quarters of the states must ratify an amendment before it can become law. The states rejected the first two amendments, which dealt with the size of congressional districts and congressional pay raises. Both amendments were considered unnecessary. By 1791, the required number of states (nine) had approved the other ten amendments. Together, these ten amendments form the **Bill of Rights**.

When Madison first proposed the Bill of Rights, some people saw his amendments as useless “paper barriers” against abuses of government power. For more than 200 years, however, his “paper barriers” have proven far stronger than even Madison might have hoped.



2. First Amendment Rights

James Madison combined five basic freedoms into the First Amendment. These are the freedoms of religion, speech, the press, and assembly, and the right to petition the government. Many people consider these basic freedoms to be the most important part of the Bill of Rights.

These First Amendment rights would have been meaningless, however, without some way to protect them. When a person believes that the government has violated these rights (or any other rights protected in the Constitution), he or she may challenge the government's action in court.

If the case reaches the Supreme Court, the nine Supreme Court justices decide how the Constitution applies to the situation. After hearing both sides, the justices vote on the case. One of the justices from the majority side then writes a majority opinion, which explains how the Court interpreted the Constitution to reach its decision. Any justices who disagree with the majority decision may write minority opinions explaining their reasoning. As you read about First Amendment rights,

you will see how the Supreme Court has applied these rights to real-life situations.

The Right to Worship Freely The First Amendment has two guarantees of religious freedom. The first says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” This means that Congress cannot make any faith the official religion of the United States, nor can it make laws that favor one religion over another. As Thomas Jefferson explained in a letter to a friend, the amendment builds “a wall of separation between church and state.”

How high should that wall be? The founders of the American republic disagreed about the answer to this question. For example, lawmakers in Virginia proposed using state taxes to help pay for teachers of religion, and prominent politicians such as George Washington supported this idea as long as no particular church was favored. Opponents of the proposal, including Madison, argued that government and religion should be completely separate.

In a 1971 case known as *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, the Supreme Court sided with Madison's view. This case challenged a Pennsylvania law that used public tax money to pay for books and teachers' salaries at private religious schools. The Court held that the law was unconstitutional because it allowed too close a connection between government and religion.

The second religious guarantee in the First Amendment says, “Congress shall make no law . . . prohibiting the free exercise” of religion. This means that people can hold any religious beliefs, without fear of punishment. However, they cannot necessarily do whatever they want in the name of religious freedom. For instance, the Supreme Court has held that parents are not free to deny their children medical treatment because of their religious beliefs.

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The Right to Free Speech and Press The First Amendment also protects freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The Supreme Court often treats these rights together as the right of free expression.

Freedom of the press is important because of the vital role that the press plays in a democratic society. Newspapers, magazines, and other media such as books and television act as watchdogs on the government. They also allow for the free flow of ideas, which individuals need to stay informed and to make up their own minds about important issues. Without a free press, democratic self-government would be impossible.

Americans had learned in colonial days that a free press was their best protection against abuse of government power. In 1735, John Peter Zenger was arrested for printing reports that the governor of New York had taken bribes. The prosecutors had said that it was illegal to damage the governor's good name, even if Zenger had published the truth. Zenger's lawyer argued that no one should be jailed for "exposing and opposing arbitrary power by speaking and writing truth." The jury agreed, and Zenger was freed.

Freedom of the press also brings responsibilities, such as taking care not to spread false accusations or publish information that would be

helpful to an enemy in wartime. Freedom of speech brings responsibilities as well. Although the First Amendment protects the right to speak freely in public places, like streets and parks, that right is not unlimited. The Supreme Court has allowed limits on some kinds of speech, such as speech that endangers public safety. As one justice said, “The most stringent [strongest] protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic.”

The Supreme Court has held that speech means more than just words. Free expression includes symbolic speech, or actions people take to express their opinions.

Protection of symbolic speech was an issue in the case of *Texas v. Johnson* (1989). This case involved a man who had been convicted in Texas of burning an American flag as a form of protest. When he appealed his case to the Supreme Court, the justices overturned his conviction. No form of expression can be banned, the Court held, just because “society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.”

The Right to Assemble and Petition The final two rights protected in the First Amendment are the right to peaceably assemble (meet together with others) and to petition (appeal to) the government. The right to assembly means that individuals can use public property for meetings and demonstrations. Parades, protest marches, and political rallies are all forms of peaceful assembly protected by the First Amendment.

While the First Amendment protects peaceful meetings, it does not give people the right to close streets or buildings or to protest violently. Police can arrest a speaker who urges listeners to riot or to break the law.

What if an assembly is peaceful, but the people watching it are not? This question came up in the case of *Gregory v. Chicago* (1969), in which comedian Dick Gregory led a protest march to the home of Chicago's mayor. When residents in the neighborhood began throwing eggs and shouting insults at the marchers, the police grew fearful of a riot and asked the marchers to leave. When the marchers refused, the police arrested them.

The marchers challenged their arrests in court, claiming that their protest was protected under the First Amendment's right of assembly, and the Supreme Court agreed that the marchers had assembled peacefully. If anyone should have been arrested, it was the mayor's

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neighbors.





3. Protected Rights

The next three amendments protect individuals from various kinds of government abuse. All three amendments reflect the experience of American colonists under British rule.

Second Amendment: The Right to Bear Arms During colonial times, Great Britain had used a standing, or permanent, army to keep order in the colonies. After winning their independence, Americans were suspicious of standing armies. They preferred to rely on volunteer state militias to protect the new nation. The Second Amendment states that “a well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed [limited].”

The meaning of this amendment has been much debated. Some people argue that it protects the right of people to own guns only if they are part of an organized militia. An example of such a militia is today's National Guard. Others believe that the Second Amendment protects the right of individuals to own weapons for their own self-defense. In 2008, the Supreme Court supported this view in the case of *District of*

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Columbia v. Heller. The Court held that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to own a gun for personal use, including self-defense inside the home.

Third Amendment: Quartering Troops in Homes Before the American Revolution, Great Britain had forced colonists to house British soldiers. The Third Amendment gave Americans the right to refuse such requests.

Today, soldiers are not quartered in homes. The Third Amendment remains important, however, as a warning to the government to respect the privacy of people's homes. As Supreme Court justice Joseph Story said, "A man's house shall be his own castle, privileged against all civil and military intrusion."

Fourth Amendment: Searches and Seizures The Fourth Amendment protects people and their belongings from "unreasonable searches and seizures." A seizure is the act of forcibly taking control of a person or property. Before arresting a person or searching someone's home, police must show a judge that there is good reason for such action. The judge then issues a **warrant** that says exactly who will be arrested or what will be searched.

Nowhere in the Fourth Amendment, however, does it say that a warrant is required for every government search. Many Supreme Court cases have held that warrants are not always necessary, but there must be probable cause, or a strong reason, for the search.

The Fourth Amendment also does not define "unreasonable search." The Supreme Court provided a definition in 1967 when it held that a search must respect an individual's right to privacy.



4. Legal Rights and Protections

The next four amendments lay out the rights and protections that apply to people who are accused of crimes or are involved in other legal disputes.

Fifth Amendment: Legal Rights The Fifth Amendment is the longest amendment in the Bill of Rights. It lists five important rights of individuals involved with the justice system.

First, this amendment gives people who are accused of serious crimes the right to a grand jury hearing. A grand jury is a group of citizens who hear the government's evidence and decide whether a trial is justified. If the grand jury determines it is justified, an indictment, or formal charge, is issued, and if not, the accused person is released.

Second, the amendment protects those accused of crimes from **double jeopardy**. Jeopardy means risk. This protection ensures that a person who is tried for a crime and found not guilty cannot be tried again for that same crime. However, the Dual Sovereignty doctrine says that if an individual's crime breaks both federal and state laws, both governments can prosecute the individual for the same crime. In these

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instances, a trial can be held in both state and federal court.

Third, the amendment prohibits **self-incrimination**. This means that police cannot force people to say things that might be used against them in a trial.

Today, police are required to remind people of their right to remain silent before they start to question them and warn people that anything they do or say can be used against them at a trial. This reminder is known as the “Miranda warning,” after the case in which the Supreme Court defined this requirement.

The protection against self-incrimination also applies to a defendant testifying in court. Defendants may refuse to answer questions that might damage their case. This refusal is called “taking the Fifth.”

Next, the Fifth Amendment says that a person cannot be **deprived** of “life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” The government must follow clear rules and act reasonably as it carries out the law. This concept is known as **due process**. For example, the Supreme Court has held that every person should be presumed innocent until proven guilty. In addition, the government must prove its case against a **defendant** “beyond a reasonable doubt.”

Finally, the Fifth Amendment says that the government cannot take someone's private property for public use “without just compensation.” Just **compensation** means that the government must pay a fair price when it takes over a person's property for purposes such as building roads or parks.

Sixth Amendment: Criminal Trial Rights The Sixth Amendment lists a number of rights that are designed to provide accused persons with fair trials. It begins with the right to “a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury.”

The right to a speedy trial means that people cannot be kept in jail for long periods before being judged at a trial. Speedy trials also ensure that witnesses testify while their memories of events are still fresh.

“Public” means that trials may not be held in secret. People have a right to attend trials to make sure that justice is being done.

The jury must be impartial, which means that jurors are not prejudiced (influenced) against the defendant. An accused person also has the right to be judged by a jury of people who live in his or her area, and prosecutors cannot exclude potential jurors based on their race or

gender.



Before a trial, the prosecutor must tell the accused person not only the charge, but also the time and place of the supposed crime. This information is essential to the accused person's preparation of his or her defense. A defendant also has the right to hear and question all witnesses who testify at the trial and can ask the court to order reluctant (unwilling) witnesses to testify against their wishes.

Lastly, a defendant has the right to an attorney to assist in his or her defense. The Supreme Court has called this the most important of all the rights of accused persons. Without legal help, an innocent person may all too easily be convicted of a crime. In the past, only people with money to hire lawyers enjoyed this important right, but today, people accused of crimes are provided with a lawyer if they cannot afford to pay for one.

Seventh Amendment: Civil Trial Rights Not all trials involve criminal actions. Some trials decide civil cases, or disputes between people or businesses. Civil cases typically involve money, property, or family matters, such as divorce. The Seventh Amendment says that, in

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all but the most minor cases, people involved in a civil case have a right to a jury trial.

The Seventh Amendment also says that “no fact tried by a jury shall be otherwise reexamined.” This means that after a jury decides the facts of a case, no judge can overrule the jury's decision.

Eighth Amendment: Bail and Punishments The Eighth Amendment protects an accused person's rights both before and after trial. Before a trial, it forbids a judge from demanding “excessive” bail. Bail is money or property given to the court to hold until an accused person appears at trial. If a defendant cannot pay bail, he or she stays in jail until trial. The Eighth Amendment prevents judges from using unreasonably high bail to keep someone in jail before his or her day in court.

After a trial, if the person is found guilty, the Eighth Amendment forbids “excessive fines” and “cruel and unusual punishments,” although it does not say what such punishments are. In 1791, physical punishments like whipping and branding were common, but today, they are considered cruel. As Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall wrote, “A penalty that was permissible at one time in our Nation's history is not necessarily permissible today.”

The Supreme Court has interpreted this amendment to mean that punishments must be “proportionate” to the crime. Judges cannot, for example, impose long prison terms on people convicted of minor crimes. The Court has also held that this amendment prohibits inhumane prison conditions, such as depriving prisoners of food.

Today, Americans continue to debate whether the death penalty should be banned under the Eighth Amendment. Opponents of the death penalty have argued that executing anyone is a cruel and unusual punishment, no matter how horrible the crime. However, the Supreme Court has disagreed. In the 1976 case of *Gregg v. Georgia*, the Court's decision stated that “the punishment of death for the crime of murder does not, under all circumstances, violate the Eighth” Amendment.



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5. Other Rights and Powers

The last two amendments were included to help keep a proper balance of rights and power among the federal government, the people, and the states.

Ninth Amendment: Rights Retained by the People One argument raised against putting a bill of rights in the Constitution was that no such list could be complete. If some rights were listed and others were not, did this mean that people had only the listed rights?

The Ninth Amendment provides the answer by saying that even though “certain rights” are listed in the Constitution, other rights and liberties not listed there are also “retained [kept] by the people.” The rights protected under the Constitution are not the only rights people have. An example of this is the right to privacy.

Tenth Amendment: Powers Reserved to the States The Tenth Amendment was included to protect the states from excessive federal power. It says that powers not given to the national government by the

Constitution are “reserved to the states . . . or to the people.”

This amendment is known as the reserved powers clause. Reserved powers are those that the Constitution does not specifically give to the national government or specifically prohibit the states from having.

So what are reserved powers? The examples are numerous, and they affect many areas of everyday life. States use their reserved powers to pass laws regulating speed limits for drivers or to determine how many days students attend public schools. States have the power to run elections, to regulate businesses inside their borders, and to set up local governments. Do you get your hair cut in a salon or barber shop? Do you visit the doctor when you are sick? The Tenth Amendment gives your state the power to issue business licenses to hair salons and the power to make sure your doctor is licensed to practice medicine in your state.



Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you read about the Bill of Rights—the first ten

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amendments to the Constitution—and the important freedoms it protects.

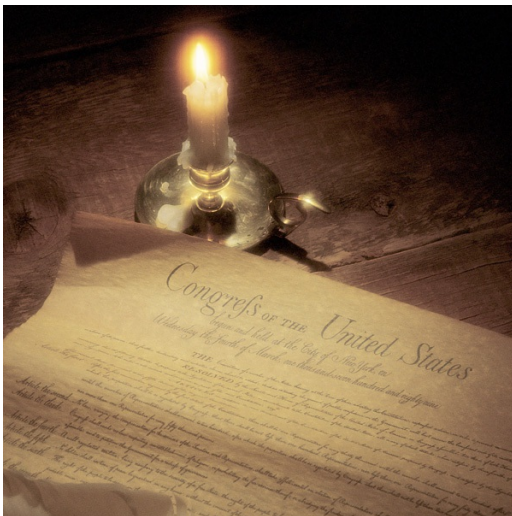
Creating the Bill of Rights By 1791, 9 of the 13 states had ratified ten amendments drafted by James Madison and approved by Congress. These ten amendments form the Bill of Rights.

First Amendment Rights The First Amendment protects five basic freedoms: the right to worship freely, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the rights to assemble and petition the government.

Protected Rights The Second, Third, and Fourth Amendments protect people against the abuse of government power.

Legal Rights and Protections The Fifth through the Eighth Amendments are intended to guarantee fair treatment for people involved in legal actions.

Other Rights and Powers The Ninth and Tenth Amendments concern the relationships among the federal government, the states, and the people. The Ninth Amendment protects rights that are not expressly listed in the Constitution. The Tenth Amendment says that powers that are neither given to the national government nor forbidden to the states belong to the states and the people.



Reading Further

What Is Religious Freedom?

Freedom of religion is the first right listed in the Bill of Rights. The founders of our nation took this freedom very seriously.

Yet, despite its prominent place in the First Amendment, religious freedom is a hotly debated issue, as the struggle to define and protect this right continues even today.

September 3, 1999, was a big day in Santa Fe, Texas, a small town just southeast of Houston. It was the first day of the high school football season, but there was more happening that day than just a game.

Marian Ward, a student at the school, was going to read a prayer over the loudspeaker before the game, which was a common custom in towns across Texas. But a U.S. district court had recently said that public prayer on school grounds violated religious freedom under the First Amendment. This decision angered people in Santa Fe, who believed they had a right to hear prayers at football games.

Marian, the daughter of a Baptist minister, defied the court that night and delivered her prayer anyway. “God, thank you for this evening,” she said. “Thank you for all the prayers that were lifted up this week for me. I pray that you'll bless each and every person here tonight.” When she was done, the crowd erupted in applause.

Not everyone applauded, though. Amanda Bruce, another student, objected; she believed the prayer could be offensive to “every other faith that does not pray to Jesus or God. People need to think about the person sitting next to them who may not be a Christian.”

Amanda, who is Catholic, helped to organize a protest before the homecoming game a month later. She and other students carried signs that read, “Prayer is Private.” Although the football game prayers continued through that season, the Supreme Court declared the practice unconstitutional throughout the nation the following year.

The dispute over public prayer at football games highlights a deeper question: What is religious freedom? In theory, it is the right to worship as one pleases, or not to worship at all, without interference from others. However, it is not quite that simple because religious freedom means different things to different people. Most Americans believe strongly in the principle of religious freedom, but they do not always agree on how this right should be defined and protected.

Religious Liberty in the Colonies

The issue of religious freedom has been debated since the earliest days of the American colonies when many colonists came to America seeking to escape religious persecution. But that does not mean they extended

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that liberty to people who held different beliefs. For the most part, their attitude seemed to be “religious freedom for me but not for you.”

Most colonies set up a government-sponsored church and insisted that people attend services. People who practiced a different faith could be punished by being fined, jailed, whipped, or even killed.

Gradually, however, things began to change as more colonists arrived and the variety of religious faiths increased, making it more difficult to impose any one faith on a colony. Another factor was the growing influence of Enlightenment beliefs. Leading thinkers, such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, believed that people had a natural right to equality, which meant that no religion or church should be favored over any other. To do so, they argued, would deny equal rights to all.

Jefferson's Law

Jefferson believed that government should not support or oppose any church or religion, and all religious matters should be left to the individual. In other words, there should be a clear separation between church and state. In 1776, Jefferson began to promote religious reform in the Virginia Assembly. Three years later, as governor, he proposed a bill to make religious freedom the law in Virginia.

Jefferson's bill aroused great opposition because some members of the assembly thought it was too radical. They wanted the state to support the Christian religion. While Jefferson was away in France, Madison fought for the bill's passage. Finally, in 1786, it became law.

Jefferson's law, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, said that no one could be forced to attend or support “any religious worship, place, or ministry.” It also said that no one should be made to suffer for “his religious opinions or belief” and that all people should be free to express “their opinions in matters of religion.” Jefferson considered this law one the most important achievements of his life. It laid the foundation for religious freedom in the First Amendment.



The Religion Clause of the First Amendment

Like Jefferson, James Madison was committed to supporting religious liberty. In his proposal for the Bill of Rights, he made sure it contained a clause on religious freedom. In fact, that clause is now the first right listed in the First Amendment.

During the months that Congress debated the Bill of Rights, the religion clause was revised several times. Finally, Congress approved the final version, which reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Although this sentence may have seemed clear at the time, it has led to some confusion over the years. First, it mentions Congress but says nothing about the states. Madison tried to include words that would prevent states from limiting religious freedom, but the Senate blocked his efforts.

A second source of confusion is the phrase “an establishment of religion.” To some people, this simply means that the government cannot create an official religion or support a particular church, and they refer to the religious beliefs of the founders as evidence of this. Others cite a letter Jefferson wrote in 1802 that states the First

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Amendment builds “a wall of separation between church and state” and argue that it forbids all government involvement in religion.



The Issue Moves to the Courts

For 150 years after the Bill of Rights was written, there was little debate over religious freedom. The courts—and most Americans—seemed to agree on what it meant.

In the 1940s, however, that sense of agreement came to an end. The Supreme Court began to hear cases that involved possible violations of religious freedom at the state level. The Court based its actions on the Fourteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1868. This amendment guarantees equal protection of the laws to all individuals, wherever they live, which means that First Amendment rights, including religious freedom, apply to the states.

One of the Court's first important cases was *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing* (1947). A man named Arch Everson claimed the use of public tax money to fund bus transport for Catholic school students represented government support for religion. In its decision, the Court agreed that the First Amendment does not allow public funds to be used for religious activities, including education.

However, the Court did not agree that the use of tax money for basic services, such as bus transport, violated the First Amendment. While the Court's decision affirmed the separation of church and state, it also demonstrated that the details of a case matter and the issue is not always clear-cut.

Since that time, the Court has heard many cases involving religious freedom in which school prayer has been a key issue. In *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), the Court struck down the use of an official prayer in New York public schools. In *Lee v. Weisman* (1992), the Court banned school-sponsored prayer at graduation ceremonies. And in *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe* (2000)—the football-prayer case—the Court said that schools cannot sponsor a prayer before football games.

These decisions sparked angry protests. Some people claimed that religion belongs in public schools and that the Court was violating their religious freedom by prohibiting prayer and other religious activities. Some justices on the Court disagreed with the majority decision, arguing that the Court was opposing religion.

However, in recent years the Court has made a number of rulings that favor religious freedom in public and private settings. In the *Town of Greece, NY v. Galloway* (2014), the Court upheld the practice of opening town meetings with a prayer. In *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* (2014), the Court ruled that family-owned businesses and small business owners have the right to make certain business decisions based on their religious beliefs.

Clearly, the issue of religious freedom arouses strong feelings. What seems like a right to some people may not seem like a right to others. These disputes are not resolved easily and, in fact, may never be settled completely. The effort to ensure religious freedom for all remains an ongoing challenge.

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Responsibilities of U.S. Citizens

With our rights come responsibilities. These responsibilities are the ways in which good citizens behave in order to ensure the well-being of our country. Some are things we must do, such as obeying laws, paying taxes, and serving on a jury. Others are voluntary actions, such as voting and serving in the armed forces. Laws protect everyone's rights, and citizens must obey them. When we break the law, we threaten other people's life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

Citizens support the government by paying taxes. The government then uses this money to do its many jobs and functions. Our taxes pay for the soldiers who protect us and for roads that let us travel with ease. State and local taxes pay for police and fire departments and for our schools, libraries, and parks. Paying taxes is a big part of being a responsible citizen.

Citizens must also serve on juries to make sure that anyone can get such a trial. Citizens are randomly selected to be jurors in their community. These citizens then determine the facts of the case as

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jurors. They work with the judge to decide the ruling for the case. This process involving a citizen jury and a judge helps protect our right to a fair trial.

Citizens hold the power of government. One way they use that power is by electing people to serve in government, such as the U.S. president and members of Congress. In order to vote, citizens have to register. Once citizens register, they can vote to elect members of the government.

History is not just important to understanding what happened. It also allows us to understand why something happened. Citizens can vote for their governor and members of their state government. They can also choose the mayor and other officials of their city or town. Those who are elected serve as representatives of the voters. For this system to work well, citizens need to vote. If they do not vote, they give up their power, so voting is both a right and a responsibility.

Citizens should make informed decisions by researching candidates and issues on which they will vote. In the past, citizens could get information by listening to candidates speak, talking with friends, and reading newspapers. Today, voters can also learn by watching television and doing research online. Citizens then must use reading and thinking skills to understand the information they have gathered. Engaging in civil discourse is another good way to exchange information. Respectful discussions with friends and family can inform citizens on policies and issues.

Citizens can also shape the actions of government in other ways. They can contact public officials, sign petitions, take part in peaceful demonstrations, and work on or give money to political campaigns or parties. Some Americans choose to join the nation's armed forces. If you are 18 years or older, you can register to serve. These Americans act as good citizens by serving in the military and protecting the country.