Idea of Citizenship

A citizen is a person who is a member of a country or state, either by birth or because the government of that country has granted the person citizenship. All citizens in a country are seen as equal before the law and have exactly the same rights, freedoms and responsibilities.

Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship

Citizens in democracies have rights that include:

- voting
- standing for election
- holding a passport
- freedom of speech, **association** and religion.

Citizens in democracies have responsibilities that include:

- obeying the laws of the country
- paying taxes
- serving on a jury
- serving in the **armed forces** (if required).

First Citizens

Since the very earliest times, people have wanted to have a say in the running of their communities. Tribal meetings and **assemblies** allowed people to voice their opinions. With the development of city-states in Greece about 2500 years ago, people began to think that a large community could be run by its people, rather than by a single person or a ruling family.

Unhappy with the kings and **tyrants** who had ruled them for centuries, the people of Athens, one of the Greek city-states, gradually moved towards a democratic system of government from about the 5th century BCE. The Athenians formed an assembly in which all citizens could meet, discuss and vote on issues that affected them, as well as make laws by which their state could be governed.

However, the Athenians had a very different idea of citizenship from that of today. In Athens, only men with two Athenian-born parents could be citizens. Athenians did not believe that all people who lived in their state were equal. In fact, they thought it was dangerous to allow people who were uneducated (like women or slaves) or who might be allied to another state (like foreigners) to vote and have a say in their government.

Modern Citizenship

The kind of representative democracy that came into being in the United States in the late 1700s brought with it a different kind of citizenship. The definition of citizen in the new American **republic** was narrower than it is today. But it was based on an understanding that 'all men were equal', and that no one person or group of people, such as a king or noblemen, had the right to rule over others without their consent. While sections of society were not allowed to vote in the early years of the republic, the wording of the Bill of Rights allowed amendments and challenges that led to others being included later.
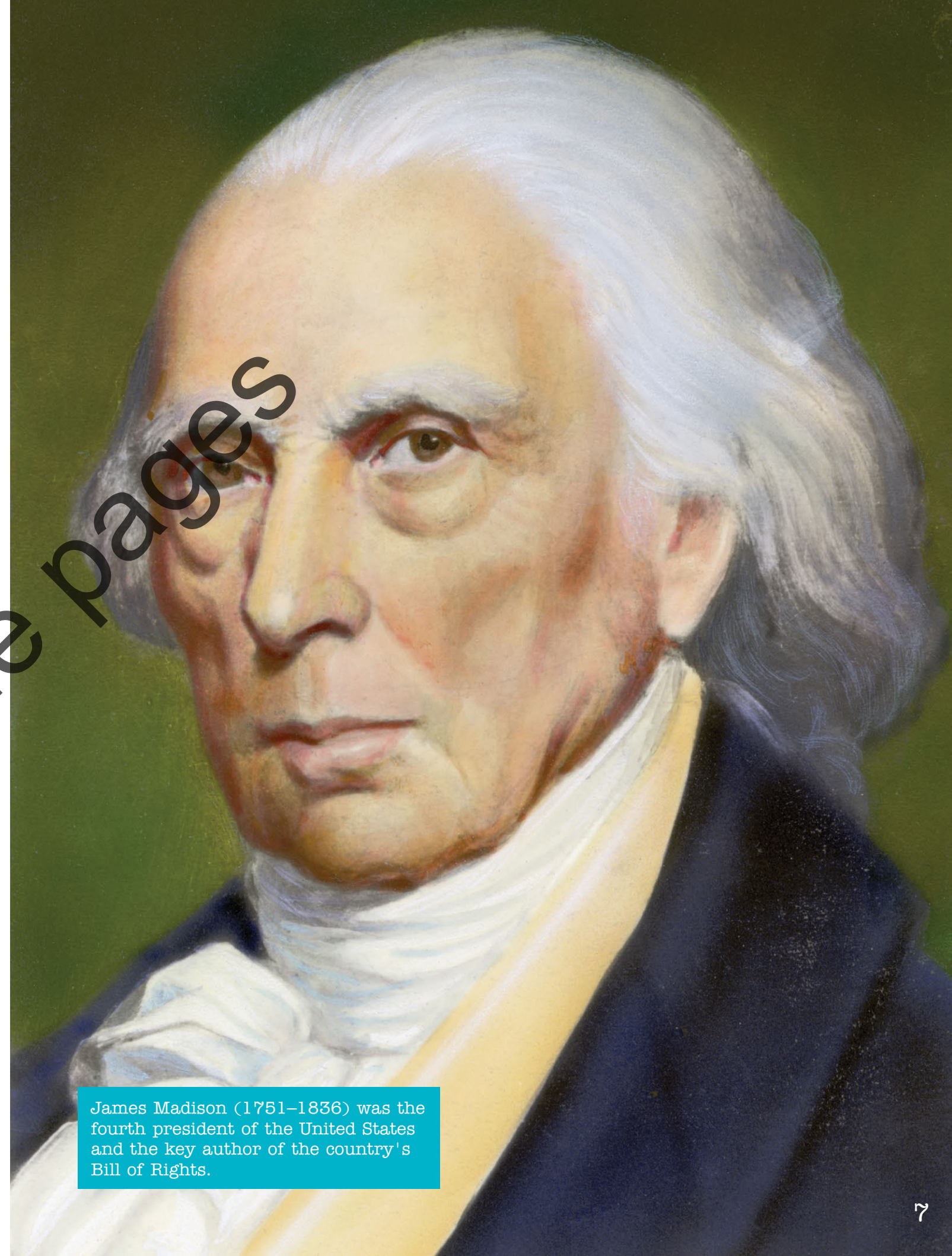
James Madison (1751–1836) was the fourth president of the United States and the key author of the country's Bill of Rights.

Struggles for Rights and Freedoms

Many countries moved towards a representative system of democracy in the 19th century, but by the middle of that century only white males who owned property or had high incomes were eligible to vote in most countries.

Slowly, changes began to occur through workers' strikes and acts of **civil disobedience** like those used by **suffragettes**. Influential politicians also played a big part by pressing for laws that would give proper representation to ordinary people and allow them the right to vote. In the United States, Abraham Lincoln was very influential in African-American men being given the right to vote in 1870. In England, although there had been a parliament since the 12th century, it was not until the 1830s that a series of Reform **Acts,** pushed through parliament by **liberal** politicians, allowed proper **electoral boundaries** to be drawn up and larger numbers of men to vote—not just those with money.

After long **campaigns** by women and their supporters throughout the late 19th century, countries began allowing women to vote, although in many cases it was well into the 20th century before this finally happened.

From Citizenship to Equal Rights

In the 20th century, the focus of political action moved from citizenship to people's rights. In the United States, although African-American men had been freed from slavery in 1865 and given the vote from 1870, state laws and prejudice in the white community prevented them from receiving many of the benefits of citizenship. It was not until the 1950s onwards that civil rights campaigns brought about significant changes for African Americans.
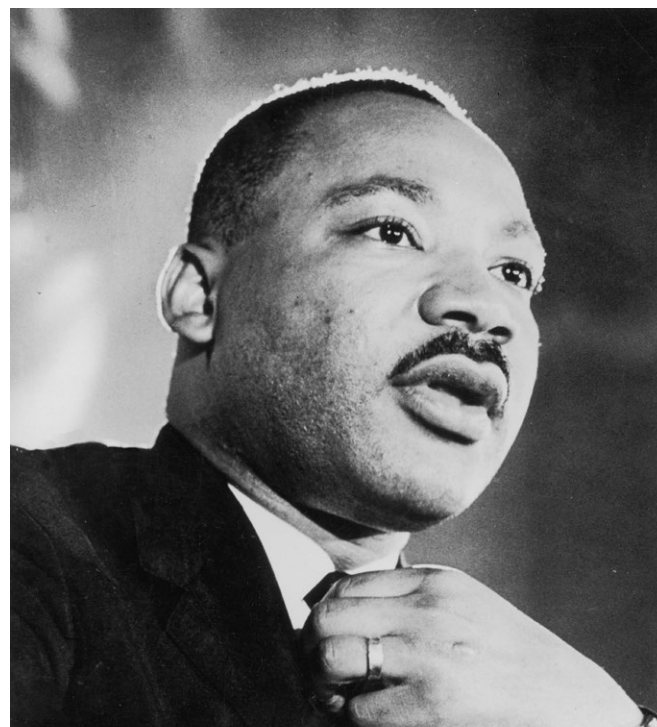
Martin Luther King

Martin Luther King (1929–68) was a Baptist minister and civil rights leader. He led anti-discrimination protests and spoke at public rallies from the mid-1950s until his **assassination** in 1968. He, and the many others who campaigned throughout this period, was responsible for ending racial **segregation** in the south of the United States and for the passing of laws in 1964 and 1965 that gave freedoms and voting rights to African Americans across the country.

In many countries, women gained the right to vote and stand for election early in the 20th century, but because of community prejudice and lack of laws to support them, they did not have the same freedoms as men. Women were unable to work in certain occupations, take out loans in their own names or continue to work in some jobs after they married. They usually did not earn the same amount of money as men did for the same work. Strong campaigns by **feminists** throughout the 1960s and 1970s managed to change discriminatory laws and the attitudes of the public.

Three hundred delegates for Women's Suffrage presented their petitions to the United States' President in 1915.

Choosing Representatives

One of the most important rights of citizenship in a democracy is the right to vote for local representatives, government and the leadership of the country. In most countries, everyone over the age of 18 has the right to take part in a secret ballot in which he or she chooses a **candidate** to represent his or her local **electorate**. There can be any number of candidates and the one with the most votes wins. Most candidates are part of a political party. The party with the highest number of successful candidates will win government and lead the country for the next electoral **term**.

Electoral Systems

A number of voting systems are used to elect representatives in different countries. People claim that some voting systems are fairer than others and allow more points of view in parliament. In many countries, including the United Kingdom and the American House of Representatives, a system called first past the post (FPP) is used. According to this system, whoever gains the most votes wins.

Many people think that the FPP system is not representative of the population. In FPP, the candidate with the most votes in any electorate wins the **seat**. If there are four candidates and one gets 36 per cent, one gets 34 per cent, one gets 20 per cent and another gets 10 per cent, the candidate with 36 per cent wins. Critics of this system claim that it is undemocratic because the majority of people (the other 64 per cent) are not represented in parliament.

In other countries including Australia, there are a range of different systems that try to reflect the range of voters. These systems include different types of **proportional representation**, which means that candidates or parties gain seats in proportion to the number of votes they receive in the election.

A New System for New Zealand

In 1993 in New Zealand, 85 per cent of citizens chose, by **referendum**, to move from a FPP voting system to a mixed member proportional (MMP) voting system.

In the MMP system, people cast two separate votes—one for a local representative and the other for the political party they would like to see in power.

Since MMP was first used in 1996, many more political parties have been represented in parliament. Governments since then have often been formed by **coalition**, which involves one of the major parties teaming up with one or more smaller parties.

This has meant that a wider range of views have been heard in parliament compared with the old system. However, it has also meant that the government is not always able to deliver on its promises to the people, as it has to bargain with other parties to stay in power.
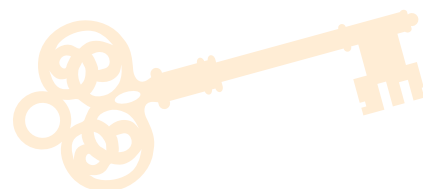
New Zealand's elected representatives meet at New Zealand's Parliament House in Wellington.

Barack Obama, a member of the United States Democratic Party, was elected United States President in 2008.

Compulsory Voting—For and Against

Since the beginning of modern democracy, there have been arguments about whether or not voting should be compulsory. Should people have to vote at an election even if they do not want to?

There are 32 countries in the world where voting in all or some elections is compulsory. In some of these countries, like Australia, citizens are fined if they fail to vote. In other places, like France, although voting for Senate elections is compulsory, no action is taken against people if they do not take part. In most nations around the world, voting is optional, which means that each individual can make up his or her own mind about whether or not to vote.

Arguments for Compulsory Voting

Supporters of compulsory voting say that it is always better to have the highest proportion of a population voting in an election. They also say that the act of voting helps to teach people about democracy.

In countries where voting is compulsory, political parties do not have to spend as much of their time and money trying to get people to vote. Perhaps most importantly, there are some people who believe that voting is not just a right but a responsibility. They say that it is the responsibility of each citizen to make sure they have chosen the best government for the country.

Arguments Against Compulsory Voting

Those who think that voting should not be compulsory say that freedom and democracy go hand in hand and that people in a democracy should not be forced to vote if they do not want to. They say that forcing these people to vote does not make for better government as they might cast invalid or blank votes that will not be counted anyway.

Some people argue that voters might vote for the first person on the list, rather than making a thoughtful choice about who they think would be best. This makes the act of voting pointless.

Voter Turnout

'Voter turnout' describes the percentage of a country's citizens that turn up to vote in elections. While on average about 60 per cent of citizens in democratic countries vote in elections, the numbers in each country differ.

Average Eligible Voter Turnout in a Range of Countries, 2000–10*

Malta	96.9%
Indonesia	78.8%
Italy	82.0%
South Africa	56.7%
Greece**	83.9%
Australia**	82.6%
Denmark	83.0%
New Zealand	76.5%
Ethiopia	65.8%
Sri Lanka	70.6%
United Kingdom	59.0%
Honduras**	60.4%
France	59.3%
Canada	55.5%
India	58.5%
Mexico**	54.4%
Russian Federation	62.5%
United States	49.2%
Switzerland	36.0%
Egypt**	17.4%

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, Sweden, 2011 © International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

*Based on each country's voting-age population

**Voting is compulsory

In Australia voting is compulsory.