

Eliot Glassheim Scholarship Application

Due to growing political tensions, the rights and responsibilities of the people who live in this country have never been more uncertain. To many, “citizenship” simply means “belonging to a country.” Others disagree, claiming that citizenship is a virtuous pledge to contribute to the world around you. Personally, the question is not so much if citizenship is *still* noble, but rather, if it ever was. I believe that citizenship is and always has been a tool used to organize society rather than a moral obligation to advance it.

Citizenship is definitely not an idea that we Americans came up with. Its roots extend back to the world of philosophers and gyros: Ancient Greece. In cities such as Ancient Athens, citizenship was a badge of honor, allowing its holders to vote at assemblies, hold public office, and serve in the military. While philosophers like Aristotle praised civic participation, such status was only available to a privileged few. According to PBS, in its prime, Athens had a population of roughly 140,000 people, but only 40,000 were considered citizens. This is because the privilege was reserved for free male landowners, excluding women, slaves, and foreigners. This minority was put in charge of making decisions for the “good of the entire community” when in reality, the elite foremost used the system to benefit themselves. Giving equal rights to women, the enslaved, or other ethnic groups would be widely considered the “moral” thing to do, but the citizens chose not to do so based on their own political agendas. This display of selfishness is the complete opposite of what was taught in this era, with philosophers such as Plato claiming that “The cause of all sins in every case lies in the person's excessive love of self.” This contributes to the idea that historically, citizenship and politics focus on personal interest rather than on what has been deemed “noble.”

As much as we'd like to ignore it, these unfortunate ideals extend further, providing the basis for our country. The Founding Fathers spoke of democracy and the rights of citizens but designed a system that initially only benefited white men who owned land. Enslaved people were only considered three-fifths of a person under the Three-Fifths Compromise, and Indigenous peoples were denied citizenship for much of U.S. history. Even today, the ripples of these offenses can still be felt, as economic imbalance and systemic racism limit the participation of marginalized communities, making citizenship a privilege rather than an inherent good. Now, one could certainly argue that philosophical ideas develop with time. Our governmental system was built around the morals of its time, making it "noble" by older standards. After all, when Thomas Jefferson penned the Constitution, he declared that "all men are created equal". But there is a huge difference between theoretical equality and true equality. If the basis of citizenship is inherently noble, it would have been granted to all, and integral ideas of freedom and independence would have applied to everyone rather than the people already in power.

Unfortunately, the righteousness of citizenship has not changed much. Today, political power is still concentrated among a select few. Practices such as lobbying, campaigning, and systemic barriers limit the effectiveness of citizenship for the average person. This is not surprising, as the United States is a capitalist nation, meaning that consumerism, money, and power run every aspect of this country. Under capitalism, citizenship cannot be truly noble because the system is built on competition and inequality, which weaken the sense of shared responsibility. Instead of focusing on the common good, capitalism encourages people to prioritize personal wealth and success, making civic duty less important. Those with more money often have more political power and better access to education, healthcare, and other rights, while poorer citizens struggle to have their voices heard. This creates a society where citizenship is not about fairness or public

service but about who can afford the most opportunities. When economic survival comes first, it becomes harder for people to act selflessly for their community, making true nobility in citizenship almost impossible.

With all of this in mind, why does the concept of citizenship exist? What is its purpose if it does not promote societal welfare? The answer is categorization. Citizenship is a tool that helps organize society by establishing a system of rights, responsibilities, and belonging that connects individuals to their government and to each other. It defines who is recognized as a member of a community and sets expectations for participation, whether through voting, paying taxes, following laws, or contributing to public life. Governments use citizenship to maintain order, distribute resources, and provide essential services. Through this idea, people gain access to legal protections and opportunities while also taking on duties that help keep society functioning smoothly. Without it, there would be no clear structure for who has rights, who makes decisions, or how resources and responsibilities should be shared, making it much harder to maintain stability and cooperation within a country. In all, citizenship functions more as a gatekeeping mechanism than as a moral duty.

This is further proven by the concerning trend of citizenship being granted or taken away based on economic and political interests rather than fairness or universal rights. Governments may offer citizenship to wealthy investors, skilled workers, or those who contribute to the economy, while making it harder for poorer immigrants or refugees to gain legal status. Some countries even have “golden visa” programs, where people can buy citizenship by investing a certain amount of money. I don’t think that nobility can or should have a price tag. On the other hand, citizenship can also be revoked or denied for political reasons, such as when governments strip citizenship from dissidents, activists, or those seen as threats to national security. In times of

political tension, certain groups may face stricter immigration policies or even be deported, often based on race, religion, or economic status rather than actual threats. This shows that citizenship is not just about belonging to a country—it is a tool that governments use to control who gets rights and protections, often favoring those who align with their economic and political goals.

So what does this mean for the average person? I'll use myself as an example. I'm considered a "good citizen" by the usual hallmarks: I am kind to people and contribute to my community. I participate in clubs such as Student Council and the Youth Commission and even voted for the first time this year. But I did next to nothing to achieve my citizen status: all I had to do was to be born here. Does this make me inherently better than someone who was not? Or someone who is of a different background and status?

Despite the many issues discussed here, I do not consider myself a nihilist, anti-government, or even anti-citizenship. I understand why this system works, because I can't claim that I've never acted in my own self-interest. Humans are inherently selfish. As much as you or I would like to claim that we would be the perfect leader and keep others' best interests in mind, is there anyone who wouldn't say that about themselves? Is there any leader, speaker, or politician who thinks to themselves, "Nope, I'm going to be inconsiderate of others in order to keep myself in power?" I truly doubt that. I don't believe that these kinds of thoughts are conscious or intentional, and as such they are almost impossible to address. Perhaps it is human nature to deceive oneself into believing that they are a good person.

This boils down to citizenship's most important societal purpose: making people feel like they are a part of something. Since the Neanderthal days, humans have longed to be accepted into groups. As explained by psychologist Stephen Braren, "Social connections provided many clear advantages for survival. Put simply, there was strength and safety in numbers. Banding together

in groups allowed our ancestors to hunt larger animals that would be difficult for any one individual to do on their own. Working together to fend off predators and protect each other further increased the odds of survival.” Congregation is a survival instinct. Categorizing each other as citizens helps create a sense of identity and unity, encouraging people to see themselves as part of a shared society rather than just individuals pursuing their own interests, even if their actions truly are self-serving. This also explains why so many dismiss politicians and so few choose to vote: they don’t have enough incentive to care about making an impact. They know, unconscious or not, that their contributions are usually negligible. Why should they participate in society if they have so little say as an individual? Why should they care about being a “citizen” when it only grants power to certain people? Not to make a true difference, but rather, to comfort themselves.

I believe that, in theory, the perfect citizen exists—an entirely selfless individual, committed to the common good, and driven by virtue rather than personal gain. However, our society is not structured to elevate such people. Those who seek power often do so for personal ambition, while those who act selflessly tend to avoid the political sphere altogether. This creates a paradox: to influence the world, you must navigate systems that reward self-interest, yet true selflessness resists the pursuit of power. Because of this, citizenship itself is not inherently noble; it is merely a status, a role that individuals can choose to use for good or bad. A noble person might be a citizen, but being a citizen does not make one inherently noble.