

# What is civic virtue? Who has demonstrated civic virtue? Why is civic virtue important in a democracy?



*Cincinnatus returning his sword*

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Objectives: Students will:

- Describe the personal characteristics of civic virtue
- Identify individuals who exemplify civic virtue and support their claim with evidence
- Explain why civic virtue is important in a democratic society

NJ Student Learning Standards for Social Studies:

6.1.8.HistorySE.3.a: Analyze how the leadership of George Washington during the American Revolution and as president allowed for the establishment of American democracy.

I. What is civics virtue

Civic virtue describes the character of a good participant in a system of government — the personal qualities associated with the effective functioning of the civil and political order or the preservation of its values and principles. These personal qualities include justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation or self-discipline.

Background: The Founders designed the American republic with those qualities in mind and believed they were essential to upholding it. These civic virtues undergirded the Founders' conception of the constitutional structure. The Founders recognized the fragility of a system that depended on such values, and the need for all citizens, not just elected representatives to exercise civic virtue.

Civic virtue is related to but not the same as patriotism. Civic virtue is focused on the individual characteristics of courage, wisdom, prudence, self-moderation rather than just the idea of my nation is best.

Summarize the characteristics of civics virtue on a whiteboard or blackboard of individuals who have demonstrated:

- Courage
- Wisdom
- Moderation or self-restraint
- Most importantly, putting country above personal or political interests

## II. What are some examples of civic virtue?

The classic example of civic virtue is Cincinnatus. A skilled military leader and hard-working farmer, Cincinnatus was asked by the government of Rome to help them as the leader during a crisis. He left his farm to lead his country into battle, which was won. Cincinnatus could have remained as leader and become long-term dictator, but instead he returned to his farm, demonstrating civic virtue.

George Washington has been recognized as possessing civic virtue. He was asked to lead the Continental Army during the American Revolution. It wasn't something he asked to do it but decided to do it for the good of the people. He left this position and went back to his farm but was then asked to preside at the Federal Convention and then to be president. After serving two terms, he left the position of president, even though he was popular enough to have continued in that position. He could have stayed and become almost a monarch, or dictator. Instead of enriching himself or keeping power, he left. This was an important point in the growth of democracy in the United States.

## III. Ask your students for other examples of civic virtue and discuss why each person exemplified civic virtue.

Some examples, among others, may include:

- John Adams was very upset by his loss to Jefferson and did not attend the inauguration but did not challenge the results.

- Abraham Lincoln, who took difficult positions in order to keep the country together as one nation.
- Harriet Tubman—put her life at risk many times to bring others from slavery—demonstrating courage, wisdom, and country above personal interests.
- Martin Luther King, Jr.-- relationship with concept of peacefully protesting against unfair laws and civic virtue—this is how we effect change—it is not always thru our elected representatives
- Nelson Mandela fought the Apartheid regime in South Africa, spending years in prison fighting to bring liberty and justice for his people, and then was elected the first black president of South Africa.
- Republicans during Watergate valued country over party by asking Pres. Nixon to resign.
- Al Gore valued country over party when he stepped aside and did not challenge the Gore v. Bush decision by the U.S. Supreme Court.
- John McCain as a member of the U.S. Senate cast the deciding vote against repealing the Obama-era's Affordable Care Act in 2017, even though he had opposed it and it was opposed by the Republican Party.
- Mike Pence as vice-president certified the Biden-Harris ticket as the winner of the 2020 presidential election in spite of President Trump's urging to overturn the election results and the attack on the U.S. Capitol during the counting of the Electoral College votes.
- Ukraine's President Zelensky—who could be hiding in a bunker like Hitler did but instead is publicly meeting with representatives from around the globe, making speeches to urge on his battered compatriots.
- Other examples of civic virtue?
- It is the explanation of WHY each person exemplified civic virtue that is important—the focus is on putting country above personal or political interests.

#### IV. Why is civic virtue important in a democracy?

- In many countries, leaders have not had the justice, wisdom and temperance to walk away from continuing to serve as leader of their country.
- Public figures must model the values of civic virtue for the public. Otherwise, the public sees that it is okay for them to let loose bad characteristics, such as greed, fear, indulgence and thoughtlessness or foolishness. Without civic virtue and a concern for the common good, a society cannot function in a fair, prudent and wise manner.

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V. Assessment

Have students identify a person (famous or from their own lives) who they believe demonstrates civic virtue and explain why is an oral and/or online presentation.