

Theories of Citizenship

There are three different theories about what it means to be a citizen: the liberal conception, the republican conception, and the communitarian conception.

The liberal conception of citizenship focuses on the individual. It emphasizes equal rights, and how these rights allow the individual to pursue their goals. The liberal model of citizenship has its roots in the Roman Empire, who extended citizenship to all conquered people. This changed what it meant to be a citizen from participating in the formulation of laws to being protected by them. Under the liberal conception, citizenship is a legal status and means membership in a community that operates under a common law, rather than citizenship being a political responsibility. Citizens under this model exercise their freedoms in their private lives, rather than in the political sphere.



The republican conception of citizenship focuses on the individual's participation in government. It was characterized by Aristotle as a model in which citizens are capable of ruling and being ruled in turn. Also known as civic self-rule, the republican conception includes all citizens having a say in the formulation of laws. Though both the liberal and republican conceptions of citizenship are concerned about the government overshadowing its citizens, the republican conception is not so much concerned that the government will take away individual rights as it is that it will interfere with the individual's ability to practice citizenship in the political sphere.

The communitarian conception of citizenship does not see the individual as existing prior to the community. It criticizes the liberal theory for emphasizing the individual and ignoring the responsibilities and duties owed to the community.