



By the People

This discussion guide is intended to serve as a jumping-off point for our upcoming conversation. Please remember that the discussion is not a test of facts, but rather an informal dialogue about your perspectives on the issues.

DIALOGUES IN DEMOCRACY

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness in the 21st Century

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”
-The Declaration of Independence

“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” is a phrase we hear all the time. These words resonated with the Founders of our nation. But what do they mean to us today? Perhaps even more important, what is the role of the citizen—and in turn the role of the government—in securing these aims? These larger questions are an important framework for our conversation about our local housing issues. In addition to our specific conversation about housing, we will spend some time in our discussion exploring how much responsibility citizens, government, and other groups should take on when it comes to housing.

WHAT ARE THE RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES AND EXPECTATIONS OF CITIZENSHIP?

The Founders didn’t just form a new nation. They created a new kind of society in which the *people*, not monarch, was sovereign. Henceforth, the people would govern themselves. It would be a self-governing republic.

With few exceptions, including the tiny Greek city-states, every person on the planet before 1776 had born, lived, and died as a “subject”-- subject to monarchs, priests, dictators, and the like-- all claiming sovereignty by divine right or force. The American Revolution was, indeed, revolutionary because the Founders used natural law to claim sovereignty for the people, thus making them “citizens.” And citizens, in turn, granted government certain authorities to do things that the people couldn’t do individually. The people, not the government, now held all rights.

*Colonial
Williamsburg*

As members of this new republic, without the absolute power of the monarchy to serve as a guide, citizens inherently became shareholders in the nation. Citizens were encouraged to act virtuously and selflessly, or as Samuel Adams put it: “a Citizen owes everything to the Commonwealth.” Now that citizens actually *were* the government, they would be called upon to serve in it, vote for it, change it (if necessary) and preserve it. Should they be bound to respond to the call? And if they did, were they obliged to become more well-informed? Once they did so, were they obliged to weigh the common good against the individual good in their decision-making? And how much should they use government to help fulfill these responsibilities to fellow citizens once these responsibilities were defined?

Those were tough questions for America’s earliest citizens as they grappled with how to shape their role in this new country. They become increasingly complex questions today, as we consider how citizens’ voices can be heard in a mass society where instead of just 30,000 persons in a Congressional District, we are now approaching 800,000.

As we consider our responsibilities as citizens, we must also consider our rights. Thomas Jefferson asserted our right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” drawing upon thinkers like philosopher John Locke and patriot George Mason. Mason’s Virginia Declaration of Rights was adopted at a 1776 meeting at the Virginia House of Burgesses, on the very spot where part of our national broadcast about these issues will be taped. Mason’s vision was reflected in our constitution’s Bill of Rights, which are our most basic, protected rights, like freedom of religion, speech and the press. But beyond those rights, as our world has become more complex and interconnected, do citizens have the right to expect other protections from government? Additionally, are we Americans, beginning to treat government as if it had rights? And is there a fundamental risk to the republic if we do so?



How government can fulfill the vision contained in Jefferson’s words has been much debated since the days of Jefferson himself. Opinion in the debate about big government vs. small government has swung back and forth over the years: from Jefferson’s “small government” notions, to the creation of the modern social safety net under Franklin Roosevelt, to Bill Clinton declaring the “era of big government is over.”

The subject of our conversation today will be how we move forward in this debate.

WHAT ARE CITIZENS’ EXPECTATIONS OF GOVERNMENT IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA?

Our country and our government are vastly larger than they were in the day of our founding fathers. Instead of a small, largely rural society of some three million people, we now have more than 300 million, largely urban and suburban residents, living in a technologically-connected, globalized world. Our earliest budgets were relatively modest, and the Founders, like Hamilton, defined the initial role of federal government to include defending the nation, maintaining the peace, regulating commerce and negotiating treaties. Today, our budget covers a vast array of spending. The total has grown to around \$2.5 trillion.

Some people argue that in addition to protecting our country and overseeing the workings of the economy, government should provide a baseline of support that takes care of the basic needs of American citizens. These basic services, they say, include education for all citizens through high school; healthcare for



the poor and elderly; and retirement support for those who have worked in paying jobs in this country. Many supporters of this perspective think America can only remain a great country by ensuring the basic education and health of its citizens.

There are others who disagree that these are the only “basics” that are needed. They believe that our government can and should provide even more support to citizens, so that there is a level playing field for success in this country-- including services like universal healthcare coverage, college-level educational support, increased transportation services, and even housing for our poorest citizens.

Still others would like these services—whatever we ultimately agree upon to be the “basics”-- to be offered not only to citizens but to others who are in this country legally, and perhaps to everyone living in this country, including undocumented migrants.

Finally, there are some who believe that government should stay out of the business of providing such services and let individuals and community groups take on those responsibilities.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR HOUSING IN AMERICA

HISTORY: Home ownership is a cornerstone of the American Dream. Today, more than 75 million Americans are homeowners, most of the rest live in rental housing, but three million Americans are homeless. Many Americans view their homes not just as places to live but also as essential to their sense of happiness and security. The roots of housing assistance in America extend back to the colonial period. Housing assistance was the province of local governments, usually towns or counties, and in its early form often consisted of a poorhouse. The federal government did not become systematically involved in providing housing assistance until the Depression era, when the government started a number of housing-related programs. These programs included providing housing for low-income families, creating the Federal Housing Administration and establishing a national public housing program.

GOVERNMENT: Today, although it is largely left up to individuals to locate housing and secure a means of paying for it, the government has stepped in to regulate real estate transactions, provide mortgage insurance, give rental assistance to low income families, construct public housing and set fair housing standards. While the federal government spends almost \$6 billion on public housing, there has been a significant attempt to move out of public housing developments into mixed-finance and scattered-site and mixed-income projects. State and local governments have also made efforts to provide assistance. Thirty-seven states and more than 350 local governments have formed housing trust funds that offer almost \$1 billion dollars in housing assistance.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS: In addition to federal and state assistance, nongovernmental organizations like Habitat for Humanity and The Community Builders, as well as neighborhood-based community development corporations, and developers who are given incentives to create mixed-income housing also add key pieces to the housing puzzle. National nonprofit housing organizations have built or repaired over 295,000 housing units of the 4.6 million available. Though government and nonprofits offer some assistance, financing affordable housing and developing it in locations outside the central city remain among the most contentious issues that Americans face. Over 37 percent of homeowners and half of all renters are spending more than the recommended 30 percent or more of their income on housing costs.

What should citizens expect government to be responsible for when it comes to securing the basic elements of life for its citizenry? Here are some approaches to consider:

- ✓ Government should take care of the basics for citizens only. Government should take an active role in the creation, funding and oversight of vital “safety net” programs such as healthcare, education and retirement. Government must also take an active role in creating basic regulations to preserve our shared environment.
- ✓ We should have an activist government. Government should expand the safety net beyond these elements to include things like transportation and housing for the poor and extend the “net” to include everyone living in this country, not just citizens. Government should take an active stance when it comes to regulating the environment and other issues that impact our shared society.
- ✓ Government should take on as little as necessary when it comes to these issues.
- ✓ Some combination of the approaches above.

Here are some discussion questions to consider:

- Is it government’s role to provide “the basics” for life, and if so, what are “the basics”?
- Should there be a government-funded social safety net of any kind? Should housing be included? At what level of service?
- Who should receive these services? Only the very poor? All citizens? Non-citizens who are here legally? Everyone in the country?
- Thinking beyond a “safety net,” what is government responsible for providing when it comes to housing? What level of government (federal, state, local) should provide these services/make these regulations?
- When it comes to housing, what role should individuals and private groups play?

This backgrounder was prepared for By the People by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. BTP is partnering with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation on the *Dialogues in Democracy* project. Ongoing BTP project funding partners include the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.



© 2007 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. All rights reserved. Any publication or use of this material without the express permission of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions is strictly prohibited.