# Civics and Citizenship glossary

## A

active citizenship

Responsive and informed participation in civic life for the betterment of one’s community.

actor (political/legal/civic/global)

Any individual, group or organisation that has influence, power and/or authority within a given area. This could include important contributions to decision-making, policies, public opinion, media coverage and responses to contemporary issues.

argument

A claim justified with reference to evidence.

Australian democracy

A system of government grounded in liberal democratic values and a belief in civic engagement. It includes a written constitution, a well-established representative parliamentary process based on the Westminster system and a constitutional monarch.

## C

citizen

A person who holds citizenship of an entity, such as a country, and who is a member of a political community that grants certain rights and privileges to its citizens, and in return expects its citizens to act responsibly, such as by obeying the country’s laws.

citizenship

Citizenship is provided through the recognition of obligations, rights and common interests, and sometimes includes legal mechanisms. A modern sense of citizenship incorporates 3 components: civil (rights and responsibilities); political (participation and representation); and social (social virtues and community involvement). Citizenship can be a legal status granted by birth or naturalisation to citizens involving certain rights (e.g. protection, a passport, voting) and responsibilities (e.g. obeying the law, voting, defending the country), and operating at different levels, from local to global.

Citizenship is also understood as membership of social, political, national or community groups that carries with it rights and responsibilities, and duties and privileges, is guided by social virtues and encourages active participation.

civics

The identifiable body of knowledge, skills and understandings relating to the organisation and working of society. It refers to a nation’s political and social heritage, democratic processes, government, public administration and legal system.

common law

A body of English law traditionally based on custom and court decisions. Also known as case law or precedent, it is law developed by judges through the decisions of courts.

community

A group with certain values, characteristics, and rights and responsibilities in common that bring it together. People belong to communities and their identities are formed within communities. Australians are members of many diverse communities, and this diversity is predicated on the values of inclusivity, pluralism and democracy.

consensus-building

The process by which a group reaches agreement about the best solution to a problem or the best choice among alternative options.

constitution

The fundamental principles on which a state or other organisation (such as a club) is governed. This usually takes the form of a legal document setting out specific powers for the government or governing of that entity.

customary law

Acknowledged behaviour by individuals and groups who recognise the benefits of behaving in accordance with other individuals’ expectations and customs. In Australia, this often refers to the customary law of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Customary law in Australia is subject to constitutional and common law.

## D

data

A general term for a set of observations or measurements collected during an investigation. Primary data is collected by the person carrying out the investigation; secondary data is collected by others.

democracy

A system of government based on the people of an entity; that is, ‘government by the people’. This is a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected representatives under a free and fair electoral system.

democratic institutions

Political, legal and civic institutions established to maintain democracy, including parliaments, governments and political parties, courts and prisons, local councils and schools.

democratic systems

Systems of government that maintain and promote democracy. Australia’s democracy is founded on the Westminster system. Other democratic systems include federalism, representative and constitutional government, an independent judicial system and welfare systems.

democratic values

Key democratic values include popular sovereignty and ‘consent of the governed’ – a belief in citizens’ right to determine their own future; to choose their own governments; to be treated equally; to live freely and under the rule of law; to be accepted as part of a diverse community; and to participate as active and engaged citizens with recognised rights and responsibilities. Other democratic values include pluralism; an acceptance of the will of the majority; the protection of minorities; and an expectation that governments will be accountable to the people. Freedom, such as the freedoms of speech, association, assembly, religion and movement, is fundamental to democratic values.

direct action

This occurs when a group takes action on an issue or problem. It can include violent and nonviolent resistance, which could include marches, sit-ins and strikes.

diversity

The mix of people in a group or society; that is, differences in factors such as age, ability, culture and religion and/or in how people identify in terms of factors such as gender and sexuality.

division of powers

The vesting of powers within different levels of parliaments. Under the Australian Constitution, the Commonwealth Parliament was vested with specific powers, while the states retained general powers. In practice, the distribution of powers has become increasingly centralised over time.

## E

Executive

The executive branch of the Australian Government is the Cabinet and Ministry, led by the Prime Minister. The Governor-General forms part of the Executive but does not exercise executive power.

## F

federalism

A system of government that unites states, or other polities, into a federation with shared power. Australia has a federal, or Commonwealth, government, and the governments of the states and territories. Federalism is about sharing power between the different entities, which limits their powers. This is known as the division of powers. The Australian federal system is based on the federal model of the USA.

## G

global citizens

Those who understand their rights and responsibilities at a global level; that is, one’s identity transcends geography or political borders, and rights and responsibilities are derived from being human. However, these rights and responsibilities do not have the legal authority or sanctions that those given by a nation have.

## I

identity

A person’s conception and expression of their individuality or association with a group. In this curriculum, identity refers to a person’s sense of belonging to a culture, or to a state, a nation, a region or the global community. It is a feeling a person shares with a group of people, regardless of that person’s citizenship status.

## L

law

The system of rules that a particular country or community recognises as regulating the actions of its members and that it may enforce by the imposition of penalties and sanctions.

legal systems

Systems that seek to establish mechanisms for order, justice and obedience in societies. Importantly, acceptance of the right of an elected legislative and executive branch to establish courts and make laws is fundamental to democratic societies. The ‘rule of law’ is also an essential democratic value, and is the agreement of all citizens, regardless of their power or position, to be equally bound by the laws of the land.

lobby group

Groups that advocate with the intention of influencing decisions made by the government.

## M

multi-faith

A term used to describe a society that is characterised by support for or free activity of religions, within the bounds of the law.

## P

pluralism

A principle that recognises and promotes diversity within a society, including but not limited to cultural and religious diversity.

## R

referendum

The principle or practice of referring measures proposed or passed by a legislative body to the vote of the electorate for approval or rejection. In Australia, a referendum is a vote of the Australian electors on a proposed change to the Constitution by the Commonwealth Parliament that must be approved by a majority of the aggregate of all voters from each state and territory, and also by a majority of voters in a majority of the states (4 or more of the 6 states).

region/regional

An area of the world grouped by common characteristics (e.g. a geographical region, such as South East Queensland or a regional intergovernmental organisation, such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN)).

representative democracy

A system of government in which electors choose representatives to a parliament to make laws on their behalf.

rights and responsibilities

Entitlements and obligations that are associated with citizenship. They are a cornerstone of modern democracies. While there are many rights a citizen may enjoy (e.g. freedom of speech, the right to vote), there are also responsibilities of citizenship (e.g. vote in elections, pay taxes, jury service).

rule of law

The legal principle that decisions by government are made according to established principles and that all citizens are subject to the law and are equal before the law. Embedded within the rule of law is the idea that people accept and follow, but also change as needed, laws as agreed by the political process and upheld by independent courts.

## S

secular

Relating to the world rather than religion; things that are not regarded as religious, spiritual or sacred. For example, a secular society is one governed by people’s laws through parliament rather than by religious laws.

separation of powers

The acknowledged division between the executive, legislature (parliament) and judiciary. These separations act as checks and balances on each other to prevent excessive concentration of power in one group.

statute (statutory law)

Written law (in the form of a bill) that has been passed through all stages by Parliament, has received the monarch’s assent (or assent from the monarch’s representative, such as the Governor-General or Governor) and has been proclaimed.

## W

Westminster system

The process of parliamentary government that evolved in England, based on a government from the democratically elected lower house; a mainly ceremonial sovereign/head of state; a head of government who commands a majority in the lower house parliament; an executive/cabinet composed of members of parliament; an independent civil service; and the rule of law based on an independent judiciary.