**Civic Virtue**

**Definition**

Civic virtue is morality or a standard of righteous behavior in relationship to a citizen's involvement in society. An individual may exhibit civic virtue by voting, volunteering, organizing a book group, or attending a PTA meeting.

**Historic Roots**

The Greek word for virtue is *arete*, which means excellence. Socrates does not use the term "civic virtue" in Plato's Republic, but highlights courage as a virtue that is derived from what one learns from a city. This distinguishes spiritual virtue, which is mandated by a higher being, from civic virtue, which follows the laws and customs of a city.

In Aristotle's discussion of virtue, he recommends that humans take pleasure in virtue. Virtue, both civic and moral, is the way in which humans achieve their greatest happiness. Aristotle holds that humans must know about these virtues before they can hope to better the community. Aristotle also maintains that it is easier to teach a person about the virtues who has been "well brought up." This implies that the education of virtue, both civic and moral, must begin at home.

St. Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and held that the highest good comes from God. The aim, then, of acquired virtues, is to flourish. Aquinas noted a difference between civic virtues that sought political good and spiritual virtues that were ordained by God.

**Importance**

Civic virtue helps people understand their ties to the community and their responsibilities within it. In many ways, an educated citizen who possesses civic virtue is a public good.

In Bowling Alone, Harvard professor of public policy, Robert Putnam, argues that Americans' sense of community is waning; the close ties they once had to their community are disappearing. The baby boomers and the Generation X-ers display a disconnection from community and a tendency toward individualism. Putnam calls for individuals to take the initiative and start educating America's youth about civic virtue, reconnecting with their neighbors, and increasing participation in politics to change this trend and to help them reconnect. Putnam defines three civic virtues: active participation in public life, trustworthiness, and reciprocity that is acquired through social connectedness. Only through an understanding of civic virtue will Americans be able to flourish in their communities and play an active role in American democracy.
**Ties to the Philanthropic Sector**

Civic virtue is the moral underpinning of how a citizen relates to society. Without an understanding of civic virtue, citizens are less likely to look beyond their own families, friends, and economic interests. They are less likely to help others in the community, to volunteer their time, to give money to nonprofit organizations, or to participate in a group that benefits society (e.g., Kiwanis or Mothers Against Drunk Driving).

In providing a civic education, it is imperative that the importance of philanthropy be stressed. To assist in this, schools can create a mission statement for their philanthropic endeavors and reward classes that actively participate. In addition, teachers can organize philanthropic class projects that range from collecting clothing for a family in need to taking a field trip to work at a local soup kitchen. In understanding civic virtue, it is important that students see the results of their philanthropic efforts and their ties to the greater society.

**Key Related Ideas**

Citizenship
Philanthropy
Public good
Social capital
Stewardship
Voluntarism

**Bibliography**


