

# Junior *Inside Government*

# Citizen

Do you ever wonder exactly what government is and what it does? Active citizens should know the basics of government so here's your chance to go behind the scenes. In this badge, you'll explore laws that affect you every day, meet people who work in government, and be active in government yourself!

## *Steps*

1. Decide what being an active citizen means to you
2. Go inside government
3. Look into laws
4. Report on the issues
5. Get involved in government

## *Purpose*

When I've earned this badge, I'll know more about how government is run.

What you do for your family and your community you do for the world, because the world is, after all, made up of families and communities like yours.

*-Junior Girl Scout Handbook, 1963*

Every step has three choices. Do ONE choice to complete each step. Inspired? Do more.

## Step 1 Decide what being an active citizen means to you

For any government to run smoothly, it needs to be full of active citizens. Before you go inside government, know what being an active citizen means to you!

### *Citizenship Test*

People who come to the United States from other countries must pass a test if they want to become citizens. The test has questions like these. How many can you answer?

1. There are four amendments to the Constitution about who can vote. Describe one of them.
2. The idea of self-government is in the first three words of the constitution. What are these words?
3. How many amendments does the Constitution have?
4. What stops one branch of government from becoming too powerful?

### CHOOSE ONE:

Be an active citizen in action. With your Girl Scout group or family, list 10 things that make an active citizen. It might include things like following laws, paying sales tax, and knowing what's going on in the world. Then do something from your list to practice being an active citizen?

FOR MORE FUN: Compare your list with the Girl Scout Law. Is following our Law the same thing as being an active citizen?

OR

Take a poll. What do you think are some of the rights and responsibilities that come with being a citizen? Ask at least three members of the community what they think, and talk about their answers with your family or Girl Scout group.

OR

Get a global view. Talk with someone who has lived or worked in another country. Ask the person what it was like to live in that country as compared to the United States. Is the definition of an "active citizen" always the same?

FOR MORE FUN: Make a piece of art about being a global citizen. (First you have to ask yourself, What is a global citizen?)

**MORE to EXPLORE:** Talk about how you and your family used these freedoms during the past month: freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly.

### Citizenship in Action: *Sybil Ludington*

You've probably heard that Paul Revere was a great patriot and citizen, but have you heard of Sybil Ludington? Sybil was just 16 years old when she made her own late-night ride during the American Revolutionary War. On the night of April 26, 1777, her father, Colonel Henry Ludington, learned that the British were attacking Danbury, Connecticut. He needed to gather troops and warn people in the countryside that more attacks were coming. Sybil rode in a rainstorm for more than 40 miles - twice the length of Paul Revere's ride - yelling that the British were in Danbury and asking the militia to gather at her house. When she returned home more than 400 troops had assembled there.

## Step 2      Go inside government

Learn more about how the government works and who helps make decisions that affect you.

### Government Words

**MUNICIPALITY:** A town or city with a local government. A municipality is usually governed by a mayor and a city council or municipal council.

**FEDERAL:** National. The United States government is called the federal government.

**GOVERNOR:** the head of a state government.

**MAYOR:** The head of a city or municipality.

**CONSTITUTION:** Laws outlining the way a government will be run. In addition to the U.S. Constitution, every state has its own state constitution.

CHOOSE ONE:

Visit a branch of the city town, county, or state government. Take a tour, or make an appointment to speak to someone who can explain for what the branch is responsible.

OR

Interview an elected official. Who decides how long the library is open or to which school you can go? Elected officials! Interview one and talk about how they help the government make decisions, and share ideas about how you can be an active citizen. Does the official have more ideas to add?

OR

Chart the government structure for your school district, town, county, or state. Make a big, branching chart that shows who has the power to make and change laws.

### MORE to EXPLORE

Go behind the ballot. Find out when elections happen, what ballots are used and how they're counted and who in your community comes out to vote. In election season, try to visit a polling place and get a tour of a voting booth.

**Wacky Laws** are created for specific reasons. As time passes, the reasons can seem less clear, but the laws still exist.

- In Missouri, it's illegal to drive with an uncaged bear.
- In South Carolina, you have to be at least 18 to play a pinball machine.
- In Brooklyn, NY, it's illegal to let your dog sleep in your bathtub.
- In Little Rock, AR, it's illegal to honk your horn at a sandwich shop after 9 p.m.
- In Connecticut, it's illegal to walk across the street on your hands.

## Step 3 Look into laws

Communities work because everyone follows laws. And, every law on the books (there are lots of them!) came from somewhere. Many considerations go into making a law.

CHOOSE ONE:

Hold a "mock vote" on community laws. Go to the library or look online for laws that citizens in your community must follow. Choose three. Then, with your Junior group, review each law. Say if you'd vote yes or no if you had been the lawmaker. Be sure to share your reasons!

OR

For 24 hours, list the laws that affect your daily life. For example, you must use the crosswalk to cross the street, you can't litter, and you must pay sales tax when you buy an apple. At the end of the day, look at your list, and talk about what the laws do for you and your community.

OR

Think about laws you might propose someday. What laws, rules, or regulations would you propose in these three situations? What should happen to a citizen who doesn't follow them? Discuss your answers with your family or Girl Scout sisters.

- You are the mayor of the first town on the moon.
- A toxic-waste dump is being built next to a farm.
- There is a five-story building with no elevators. It has only one inside staircase.

## MORE to EXPLORE

**Pretend you're a Girl Scout in 1977.** As Juniors did to earn their Active citizen badge find things for which your family has helped pay by paying taxes. What responsibilities do you have when you use these things?

## *Letters to the Editor*

Most newspapers and magazines have a page where letters to the editor are printed. This is a place for citizens to voice their opinions about issues or to respond to articles printed in the publication. Not all of the letters received by a publication can be printed, but if you feel strongly about an issue, try to get your voice heard! Here are some tips for writing your letter.

1. State the reason for your letter at the very beginning.
2. Keep it short. Try for 150 words or less.
3. Be timely. If you are responding to something written in the newspaper or writing about a specific political even, try to send it within a day or two after you read the article or the event's occurrence.
4. Stick to a single subject. If you want to address more than one issue, write two letters!
5. Be polite. Explain respectfully why you agree or disagree.
6. Proofread your letter carefully for grammar and spelling mistakes. Have a friend or family member give it a read, too.

## Step 4 Report on the issues

Every city, town, or county has issues and needs that are important to the people who live there. An urban community might need to find places for parks. A more suburban area might have to decide whether to build a new school or widen a road. You've been learning about these issues, and now it's your chance to dig deeper and be a citizen reporter!

CHOOSE ONE:

Report on a government meeting. Attend a meeting of the town council, board of education, or county commissioners. What are the issues they're discussing? Which are most important to you? Pretend you're a reporter and take notes. Then, write an article about the issue you think is most important. Share it with other Girl Scouts in your community.

FOR MORE FUN: Go to a meeting in a community very different than yours. Which issues are the same? Which are different?

OR

Follow the local news everyday for one week. What stories do you think are most important to your community? Choose one, and write your opinion in a letter to the editor of your local paper. Too many letters are received for the paper to publish every one - but it's still good to try. Local officials read letters to the editor to get ideas about what laws to put in place.

OR

Interview a local historian or longtime citizen. Ask about how your community has changed over the years. Is your community still working out the same issues it was 20 years ago? If not, what are the new issues? Turn your interview into a radio program, video, or article to share with others in your community.

## Step 5 Get involved in community government

There's no better way to understand government than to get in there and try being a part of it! Get involved in the government of your school, sports league, place of worship, or other community group to see what the real challenges are – and to help make a difference.

### Parties, Cartoons, and Politics

Democrats and Republicans are the two major political parties in the United States. A political party is a group of people with similar ideas about important issues. There are other political parties in America, too but they're not as big or as powerful.

These two major parties have some fun symbols: the donkey for the Democrats and the elephant for the Republicans. The donkey and the elephant have been their mascots since the late 1870s, when cartoonist Thomas Nast drew a Democratic donkey and a Republican elephant. (Thomas Nast also added the funny beard to "Uncle Sam," whose character is a symbol of the United States government.)

#### CHOOSE ONE:

Plan a campaign as if you were running for office. Make your poster and write a list of the top three things you would try to change if you had that office in your organizations. Take turns sharing your ideas with Girl Scout friends. What do you like about each other's campaign ideas and what would you change?

FOR MORE FUN: Use your campaign to actually run!

OR

Work on someone else's campaign. If being an elected official isn't for you, use your leadership skills to help out the candidate in whom you believe. Make posters or buttons or assist with a speech about the reasons you think this person should be elected.

OR

Create a pamphlet or poster. Use it to raise awareness about an issue you'd like to change. Maybe you'd like a mural to cover up graffiti in the school bathroom, or to eliminate plastic cups at your place of worship. Get permission before you pass anything out, and think very carefully – like a politician – about the words you use. You want to educate and inspire people to take your side, so be respectful of the current administration and citizens of the community.

### MORE to EXPLORE

**Make your own government.** Many computer games involve creating a country or city from scratch. Try creating a big government from the ground up.

## Add the Badge to Your Journey

Wondering what Take Action projects to do on your Journeys? As you're talking to people in government, keep your eyes and ears open to problems in your community that you can help solve.

Now that I've earned this badge, I can give service by:

- Sharing with my classmates what I've learned about being an active citizen
- Identifying needs in my community so I can educate others
- Getting involved in student government or in leadership on my sports team or at my place of worship

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*I'm inspired to:*