

Civic Matters Glossary

Some civic terms can be difficult to understand. Explore our glossary to learn more.

15th Amendment

an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that was ratified in 1870 and guaranteed that the right to vote could not be denied on the basis of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude” (meaning whether or not the person was enslaved). In essence, it granted Black American men the right to vote.

19th Amendment

an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that passed in 1920 and guaranteed that the right to vote could not be denied on the basis of sex. Theoretically, it extended the right to vote to American women. In actuality, Black women still had to fight for equal voting rights and protection against race-based discrimination.

Absentee Ballot

a ballot that is typically submitted by mail ahead of Election Day by someone who is unable to physically go to their poll site on Election Day (an absentee voter).

Administrative Code

a rule in an agency or governmental policy.

Advocacy

the process of demonstrating (showing) public support for a cause or policy on behalf of others.

Amendment

a change or addition to a law, contract, or official document.

Audience

the individual or group of people you intend your message to reach.

Ballot Proposal

a question, law, or issue that appears on an election ballot. It is submitted for voters to decide on if it should pass or not. A ballot proposal is also commonly referred to as a ballot referendum, initiative, or measure.

‘Empowering Women, Strengthening Communities’

Bill

a proposal for a law. Also known as a legislative proposal.

Borough President

an elected official voted into office by borough residents. They can fund local projects and services, advise on land use decisions, appoint community board members, and co-sponsor legislation in the City Council (though they can not vote on them).

Burnout

a state of physical, emotional, and or mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged or repeated stress in the workplace, at home, or other environments/areas of life.

Call to Action

specific guidelines or next steps given to your audience to address the topics presented in your story.

Capital Budget

a portion of the public budget funds that is distributed to physical infrastructure projects like schools, public housing, parks, libraries, streets, and other public spaces.

Census

a count or survey of the population that also collects economic and demographic information such as age, race, sex, household size, and income. In the U.S., the Census is conducted every 10 years to determine the apportionment (or distribution) of legislative seats and the amount of funding allocated to communities. - U.S. Census Bureau

Checks and Balances

a system established by the U.S. Constitution in which there is a separation of powers across the branches of the federal government –legislative, judicial, executive– that prevents one branch from exerting too much power.

Cisheteropatriarchy

a system of society in which cisgender men and heterosexuals (especially heterosexual men) are privileged, dominant, and hold power. - Ed. R. Tolteka Cuauhtin, Miguel Zavala, Christine Sleeter, Wayne Au, Rethinking Ethnic Studies, 2019. WCC Blueprint

City Council

the branch of city government that writes and passes laws that impact those who are living in, working in, or visiting the city. Also known as the legislative branch. The New York City Council consists of 51 members and is an equal partner with the Mayor in governing New York City.

City/Local Charter

a document that serves as the City's constitution and guide for local government. It breaks down the roles and power of each elected official or body and the relationships between them.

Civic

relating to a city or town, and the responsibilities and privileges of membership in a community.

Civic Duties

the responsibilities and obligations one has to their community to maintain it and improve society. Some examples include paying taxes, voting, and jury duty.

Civic Education

Learning and training to prepare residents to be active members of society and to participate in democratic processes. "The overall goal of civic education is to promote civic engagement and support democratic and participatory governance." - Youth Power

Civic Engagement

all the things one can do to participate in their community with the goal of making positive change and improving the quality of life for oneself, one's family, and city.

Civic Rights

all of the promises that society has made to you as a member. In the U.S., some examples include the right to a fair trial and the right to public education.

Civil Rights

freedoms that every person is guaranteed under equal protection of the law, regardless of race, sex, or religion.

Collective Action

action taken by a group of people to achieve a common or shared goal.

'Empowering Women, Strengthening Communities'

Collective Well-Being

the state of a group or community's social, economic, and environmental health.

Community Board

a group of community members appointed by their Borough President to advise and make decisions on issues that affect their neighborhood.

Community Care

the practice of helping or supporting someone else, or multiple other people, in the community. It includes any type of care that benefits others.

Community Engagement

the process of working with members of a community to address issues that affect the well-being of those people. Community engagement centers the ability of community members to lead decision-making rather than external, institutional forces.

Community Mobilization

the process of people coming together (pooling efforts and resources) around an issue toward a common goal. Also referred to as social mobilization.

Community-Based Organization (CBO)

Nonprofit organizations that are representative of a community or significant segments of a community and provide direct educational or related services to its members. - Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School

Comptroller

an elected official who oversees the city's fiscal health by conducting performance and financial audits of city agencies, protecting pensions, enforcing prevailing and living wage laws, overseeing the budget, and promoting policies that enhance government's efficiency, integrity, and performance.

Constituents

voting members of a community or organization that have the power to appoint or elect representatives.

Democracy

a form of government where the people/residents help to make decisions about how the government is run, either through direct participation or fair representation by elected officials.

Discrimination

the unfair treatment of a person due to their belonging to a certain group (i.e. women, immigrants, low-income people, etc.)

District

a defined geographic area of a neighborhood that often has a corresponding elected official who is voted into office by the people who live there.

District Attorney (DA)

an elected official who serves as the top prosecutor for a town, city, county, or state. The District Attorney has wide latitude on what and how to prosecute, such as setting bail or making decisions about plea bargains.

Early Voting

a democratic process that allows citizens to vote prior to Election Day. Early voting gives more voters the flexibility to vote according to their own schedules and creates shorter voting lines, all to make it easier to vote and increase voter turnout. - Steven Carbó and Estelle Rogers, Demos

Electorate

a body of people allowed to vote in an election and help choose who gets to represent them in government.

Equality

the state or quality of being equal, or in other words, individuals being treated the same and having the same access to goods and services regardless of individual need. - Milken Institute School of Public Health, George Washington University

Equity

an approach to addressing disparities in our social system that factors in different circumstances of people and groups and distributes amounts of aid needed to reach equal outcomes in comparison to other individuals/groups. - Milken Institute School of Public Health, George Washington University

‘Empowering Women, Strengthening Communities’

Executive Authority

the political head of a department that is responsible for carrying out activities related to the executive branch; in relation to the City, the executive authority refers to the mayor.

Expense Budget

a portion of the City's public budget that funds things like salaries of government employees, and routine operating expenses like copier paper and printing services. It can also fund projects related to programs, events, or services like a mental health fair, art classes, and more.

Fiscal Year

a one-year period that governments, nonprofit organizations, and businesses use to report their financials and budgeting plans.

Gender

a social and cultural construct where a range of characteristics are attributed to women/girls and men/boys. These characteristics include norms, behaviors, and roles. - World Health Organization

Gender Non-conforming

Gender non-conforming is an umbrella term referring to people who do not identify in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category. Some gender non-conforming people identify as non-binary, genderqueer, trans masculine, trans feminine, agender, bigender or other identities that reflect their personal experience. It is important to respect and use the terms that people use for themselves, regardless of any prior associations or ideas about those terms. - Human Rights Campaign

General Election

a local, state, or national election held at regular intervals in which voters choose or elect candidates into office.

Gerrymandering

the process of altering district boundaries in order to give an unfair political advantage to one's political party in an election.

Horizontal Structure

an organizational structure that reduces or eliminates hierarchy.

'Empowering Women, Strengthening Communities'

Human Rights

basic rights and freedoms that all humans are entitled to. They are inherent to all of us regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Some examples include the right to life, right to food, and right to education.

Individual Wellness

the state of a person's own emotional, physical, mental, social, and environmental health.

Intersectionality

a concept, coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, that describes the way social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, are interconnected and impact how an individual or group may be perceived or treated by society. - Taylor Hawk, Denison University

Legislation

refers to laws and the process of creating laws.

Lived Experience

the knowledge and expertise gained through direct personal engagement with everyday events and topics rather than through representations constructed by other people.

Main Idea

the thesis or the primary topic of a story.

Mayor

an elected official that serves as the executive authority of the City. The Mayor has the power to appoint and remove commissioners, appoint judges, and set the city's policy and budget priorities. Other responsibilities include managing relationships with state and federal lawmakers; proposing, enacting, and vetoing laws; and managing large zoning, land use, and housing policy decisions.

Mental Health

the state of one's emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

Movement Building

the process of organizing and helping to activate the determination and capacity of people and organizations to work individually or collectively toward a common goal. - Racial Equity Tools

'Empowering Women, Strengthening Communities'

Municipality

a self-governing city, town, borough, or village.

Mutual Aid

a form of political participation in which people care for one another and work together to meet needs and solve problems through collective action.

Non-binary

an identity or category for persons who do not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside of these categories. - Human Rights Campaign

Participatory Budgeting

a process in which members of the community submit proposals for projects and vote on where to allocate parts of the public budget. - Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP)

Partisan

demonstrating strong, biased support for a party, cause, or person.

Patriarchy

a social system and organization in which male supremacy operates at the expense of women and other individuals. Men hold primary power and are predominant in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. - IGI Global

Primary

an election where voters determine the candidates that will represent their political party in the general election.

Protected Class / Group

a group of people that share a common trait that are protected by the law from discrimination on the basis of that trait.

Public Advocate

an elected official and non-voting member of the New York City Council who can introduce and co-sponsor legislation. The Public Advocate is the first in line to become Mayor if they cannot fulfill their duties and the Public Advocate oversees city agencies; investigates and makes proposals to address citizens' complaints about city services; and appoints members to boards and commissions.

Public Budget

the breakdown of how the government spends money and pays for activities. The budget shows the choices and priorities of the Mayor and City Council in giving out public resources in categories like education, law enforcement, healthcare, housing, and more.

Public Servants

a person who works for the government and its residents. Also referred to as Civil Servants.

Racial Justice

the systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. It acknowledges the presence of deliberate systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity through proactive and preventative measures. - Racial Equity Tools

Redistricting

the process by which new congressional and state district lines are drawn and divided. This occurs every 10 years after the Census.

Representative

a person who is elected by the people in order to speak and act on their behalf. Also referred to as an elected official.

Reproductive Justice

the systematic fair treatment of women, girls, and people with uteruses and protection of one's right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, or the power to make decisions regarding one's own body.

Rights

powers and privileges individuals are justly entitled to, that are enforced and protected by the law.

Self-Reflection

the process of understanding who you are, your values, and why you think, feel, and act the way you do.

Social Justice

a vision of an equitable society in which everyone is treated fairly, has equal rights, and access to resources and opportunities. –

‘Empowering Women, Strengthening Communities’

Maurianne Adams and Lee Anne Bell, eds., Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, Routledge, 2016.

Solidarity

unity or fellowship that is based on commonalities such as personal characteristics, interests, or goals.

Statute

a written law enacted by the government.

Systemic

pertaining to practices, roles, privileges, and attitudes embedded into the normal, everyday practices within a society.

Veto

a power of the head of the executive branch (e.g., the president, governor, or mayor) to reject a piece of legislation and not allow it to be enacted by refusing to sign it into law. In some instances, due to checks and balances, the decision can be overridden. - Annenberg Classroom

Voter Suppression

the denial, discouragement, or disruption of someone's ability to vote.

Voting Rights Act of 1965

legislation that prohibited race-based discrimination in voting processes, and aimed to reinforce Black Americans' right to vote.

White Privilege

the set of social and economic advantages, benefits, choices, and entitlements that white people have because they are white. - Racial Equity Tools

White Supremacy

the political, cultural, and economic system in which white people overwhelmingly hold power and control material resources. - Vann R. Newkirk II, The Atlantic

Zoning

a law that sets limits and parameters for how land can be used.