

Essay: Introducing the Theme of Citizenship in Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) History

By The Asian American Education Project

Background:

Citizenship is often the most privileged form of belonging to a nation. In the United States, full political rights—such as the right to vote and ability to hold public office—are predicated upon citizenship, as well as certain protections and rights that are not extended to non-citizens. Asian American Pacific Islander Desi Americans (APIDA) have been systematically excluded for decades from not just citizenship, but also entering the country. They however have resisted these challenges and fought for their rights and for inclusion. Obtaining citizenship has been one significant method for members of the APIDA community to gain stability and security amidst continued racism and xenophobia. Citizenship also provides them the opportunity to build community power and enact greater change.

Vocabulary:

- **Ethnicity:** a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition, ancestry, or language
- **Birthright Citizenship:** citizenship that is automatically granted to persons born in the United States or to those born to U.S. citizens
- **Nationality:** the status of belonging to a particular nation or country
- **Naturalization:** the legal process that a person undergoes to achieve citizenship
- **Sovereignty:** freedom from external control; the ability to rule over oneself without outside interference
- **Territory:** an organized division of a country that is under the jurisdiction of a nation but that is not yet admitted to the full rights of a state

Read the text. Underline or highlight important ideas.

**In this space, write down
notes and questions:**

There are many ways that a person might identify themselves or another person. For example, there are several different ways of defining “American.” First, geographically, “American” could apply to anyone living in North and South America. Second, a person could identify as “American” by nationality, which refers to a person’s place of birth. Lastly, a person could define “American” as having U.S. citizenship. Citizenship is often the most popular definition for “American.”

In the United States there are two paths to becoming a citizen: birthright and naturalization. Birthright citizenship refers to all persons born in the United States (or born to parents who are U.S. citizens). Naturalization refers to the legal process that a person completes to become a citizen. While the Constitution gives all people in the U.S. certain rights and privileges, citizens of the U.S. receive particular rights that non-citizens do not have, such as the

ability to vote and hold elected office, among others.

Throughout history, the U.S. government has enacted policies to limit and restrict the ability of different groups to gain citizenship. It has also infringed upon the sovereignty of Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders.

Obtaining citizenship, or naturalization, is an important way that immigrants can gain stability and security, build power, and grow their communities in order to actively participate and engage in U.S. society. Asian immigrants have resisted racist laws and fought for citizenship rights. Notable activists include Wong Kim Ark, Bhagat Singh Thind, and Takao Ozawa.

The issue of citizenship is even more complicated for Native peoples and Pacific Islanders. As Indigenous Peoples, they have inhabited this land even before colonial settlers imposed their laws regarding land ownership and citizenship. These groups may have a more complex relationship with obtaining U.S. citizenship as it can represent a loss of sovereignty due to colonialism or imperialism. Some may have complicated feelings about their U.S. citizenship—rejecting the label "American"—and instead identify more strongly with their respective land/islands and its national identity. On the other hand, U.S. citizenship provides increased opportunities for participation in U.S. society.

Furthermore, not everyone on U.S. land is a citizen. The U.S. currently has five territories: American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The residents of these islands, except in American Samoa, are U.S. citizens but with limited rights. They do not have elected representatives in Congress and cannot vote for the U.S. President, but yet are required to pay federal taxes and serve in the U.S. military.

So what does it mean to be an "American"? According to a poll result of 1,000 U.S. adults, a substantial minority of respondents stated they consider "real Americans" as those who are born in the U.S. (and thus have birthright citizenship), who are Christian, or who speak English. The definitions of who is a "real" American have shifted during the country's history and continue to evolve. Defining "American" is complicated and varies depending on who is being asked, and how they value race, ethnicity,

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nationality, or citizenship.

In this space, write a summary of the text in 2-3 sentences:

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